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SEBASTIAN STROME



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SEBASTIAN STROME.



SEBASTIAN STROME.

A Novel.

BY

JULIAN HAWTHORNE,
AUTHOR OF 'GARTH,' 'ARCHIBALD MALMAISON,' ETC.

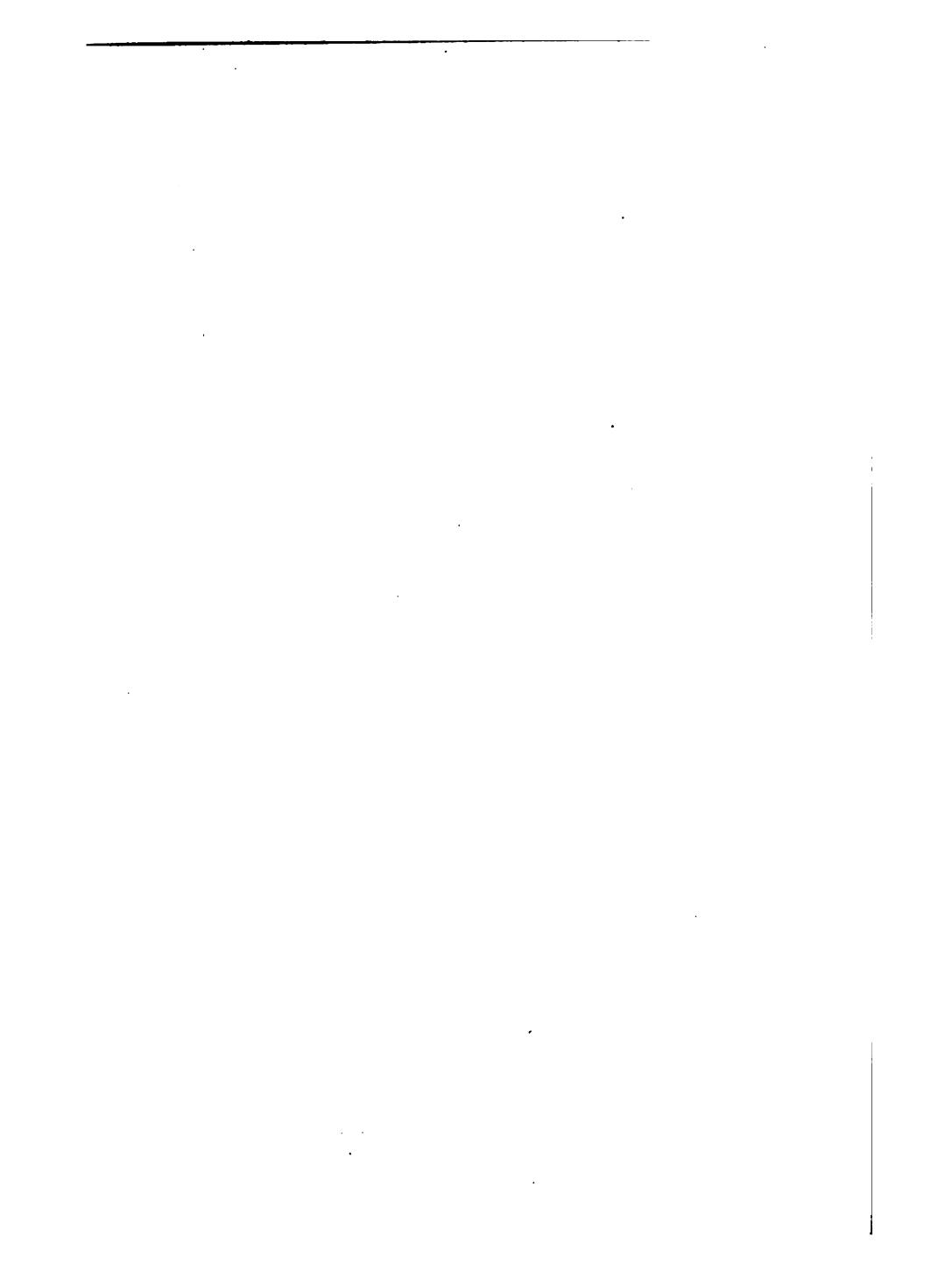
IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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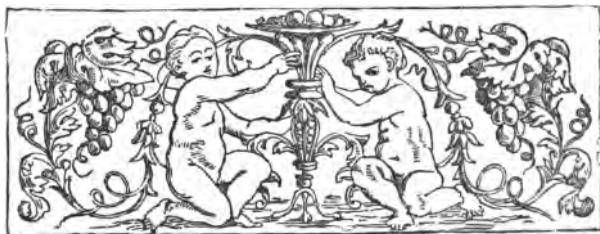
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To
GERALD DIXON, Esq.,
IN COMMEMORATION OF A FRIENDSHIP BEGUN
SO LATE IN LIFE AS TO STAND A GOOD CHANCE OF
OUTLASTING IT,
This book is dedicated by
THE AUTHOR.

October, 1879.





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SEBASTIAN STROME.

CHAPTER I.

C E D A R H U R S T .

BREAKFAST was ready at Cedarhurst Vicarage, but the Rev. Arthur Strome had not yet come in from his early morning rounds. It was the middle of winter, and the sun was not half an hour above the horizon : not the sort of weather to beguile an ordinary gentleman out of his bed at daybreak—especially if, like the vicar, he had turned the corner of fifty years. But the spare-framed, warm-hearted,

vehement personage under whose ministrations the inhabitants of Cedarhurst, or some of them, had grown in grace for a generation past, was not the man to set an example of sluggishness to his parishioners. On the contrary, his spirit never seemed to sleep at all, and was inclined to grudge its fleshly envelope even so much repose as nature absolutely demanded. He was one of those indomitable and—to some minds—slightly unreasonable creatures, who persist in keeping up, through the winter, habits which the majority of mankind in easy circumstances are satisfied to practise only during the longest and most amiable days of summer. His sympathies, his principles, and his purposes haled him about like so many big bullies, and, so he performed their bidding, recked little what became of his flesh and bones. He was in a state of chronic misapprehension as to the limits of his physical endurance, and was the only person to manifest surprise and indignation when he had overstepped them. To make matters

worse, he was the victim of certain extreme views as to bodily training ; he bathed every morning all the year round in cold water, in a cold room ; and then, after kneeling down and humbly praying to God, he got up and went resolutely through a quarter of an hour's 'extension movements' with the dumb-bells. By this time it was full seven o'clock ; and family prayers having been read, forth sallied this irrepressible clergyman of the Church of England into the open air, took a turn about his garden and farmyard, and paid visits to those of his poorer parishioners whose names he had noted down the evening before. At half-past eight he was back to breakfast, which consisted, for him, of a plate of oatmeal porridge and a cup of black coffee. Between this and dinner, at half-past six, his time was fully occupied : he ate sparingly, and sometimes drank a table-spoonful of light claret in a tumbler of water, affirming, as he did so, that 'occasional dissipation is good for men of robust physique like myself.' In the evening he was at anybody's disposal rather

than his own, except on Fridays and Saturdays, when he wrote his sermon. It might be supposed that, by the time Sunday came round, even this robust sybarite would peevishly insist upon taking a little repose. If so, his conception of repose was not incompatible with being on his feet all day, except when he was on his knees ; and as for peevishness, we cannot do better than quote the emphatic utterance of Mistress Barbara Trench, the elderly serving-woman who had spent the better part of her life in the Strome household. 'On week-days,' said this excellent woman, 'Mr. Strome he is, maybe, not so very much better nor one of them saints ; but on the Sabbath, ma'am, you mark my word, he is a hangel !' And, indeed, a certain divine brightness seemed to illuminate his face on that day ; and there was a tenderness in his resonant voice, and an introspective gentleness in his deep-set blue eyes, that made him seem like one who walked with unseen spirits of good.

Such was the man who was late to break-

fast on this cold winter's morning a quarter of a century ago. Mrs. Strome had already taken her place at table. She was a small, quiet-eyed, silvery-haired lady, with an old-fashioned repose and serenity of manner, which impressed the beholder somewhat like a soothing undertone of quaint melody. She had the air of a wife who builds her faith upon her husband as upon a rock. She believed him to be the noblest and the purest among all pure and noble men. She had loved him for thirty years, and during that time he had done nothing that had not seemed to her a warrant for loving him more. During that time their sky had been obscured by no cloud that had not drawn them closer to each other, and rendered more secure and intimate their sense of mutual dependence. And now, after many dangers passed, and some hardships and more than one deep grief endured, their evening of life had set in with a mellow calm that seemed the fit sequel to its beginning. Of their three children, Sebastian, the first-born son, was still living,

and was soon to take orders, and carry on and crown with honour his father's career. The congregation which every Sunday filled the grey-towered Norman church was proud in the knowledge that it listened to sermons which the most learned and famous men of the day had travelled to Cedarhurst to hear. In fact, Arthur Strome's gifts had obtained wide recognition far beyond his own circle, and would have led him to high preferment in the Church but for one thing, namely, his own incorrigible disbelief in his fitness for any beyond the humbler duties of his calling. 'I haven't the head for it,' was his answer to those who suggested possible bishoprics. 'I can preach to these people here, and talk to them in their houses, and christen them, and marry them, and bury them ; they and I are old friends, and they can make allowances for me. But I haven't got it in me to be a bishop. My wife, now, would make a capital bishop ; and perhaps, some day, my boy Sebastian—he's like his mother, thank God !' Whether the Reverend Arthur Strome were

right or wrong in his self-estimate, at all events Reverend he remained to the end of his days; and the congregation at Cedarhurst, with vicarious self-denial, never once resented his devotion to them. On the contrary, they raised a subscription—there were many wealthy ones among them—and built for him the handsome vicarage, with solid stone walls, and mullioned windows, and velvet environment of cedar-shadowed lawn, in which the latter decade of his life had been spent. It was, perhaps, as lovely a home, both spiritually and materially, as could be found in England. Beneath that Gothic roof sin and suffering would seem to have no right to enter. The atmosphere was too pure and clear for them.

Mrs. Strome sat without change of posture, her small white hands—somewhat thin now, but still retaining their shapeliness and delicacy—clasped against the edge of the table before her. The level rays of the misty winter sun illuminated the blue steam of the tea-urn, and sparkled over the antique

silver breakfast-service. The broad strings of Mrs. Strome's lace cap, falling across her bosom, rose and subsided with a barely perceptible movement as she breathed. The rare power of sitting perfectly still which characterised this lady was but another expression of the interior steadfastness of soul which looked forth from her face. It was a face blended of innocence, refinement and moral intrepidity ; a face eloquent of experience, and subtly alive in every part ; free from every trace of selfish passion ; and whose youthful charm old age had rendered sweeter and more reverend. And yet it was a face in whose lines a keen observer might have detected a something inexorable and almost stern, which a revealed sinner would have shuddered to meet.

The gabled clock, which occupied a corner of the oak-panelled breakfast-room, chimed the three-quarters after eight. After the sound had died away Mrs. Strome said :

‘ Barbara, did Mr. Strome leave any word when he went out this morning ?’

The question was addressed to the short, square-shouldered, immaculate elderly female, whose name has already been incidentally mentioned, and who was standing rigidly upright behind her mistress's chair, in a black gown and white apron, cap, and cuffs.

'If you please, ma'am, Mr. Strome did not.'

'I hope none of the poor folk have been taken ill this cold weather,' rejoined Mrs. Strome, after a pause.

'If you please, ma'am, I 'ave 'eard that Mrs. Jackson have been worse.'

'It is her intemperance, poor woman. I will see her again to-day. Was that tea sent to her yesterday ?'

'A pound of the best in the house, as you ordered, ma'am.'

'I will show her how to make it myself. If it is properly made, I think she must prefer it to—gin.'

'If you please, ma'am, it was her Fanny's going wrong last spring as brought her to it. Tea don't seem strong enough for them sort

of things. She was as sober as most before Fanny went away.'

'Mrs. Jackson does not know that her daughter has gone wrong, Barbara ; she only infers it from her having left home so suddenly and given no address. I do not like you to infer evil that you are not certain of either. Fanny may be innocent.'

'I'm sure I do 'ope so, ma'am,' said Barbara, with an emphasis sufficient to annihilate the strongest aspirate. 'But if I was to speak my opinion, it's little good we shall 'ear of Fanny Jackson. Always hacting as one above her station, Fanny was, though only a poor linendraper's daughter, and hinattentive both to her Bible and her duties when at the 'All.'

'Barbara, it is you who are forgetting your Bible now,' interposed Mrs. Strome, in a tone so clear and uncompromising that Barbara, who knew the significance of all her mistress's tones, instantly dropped the subject. Nothing more was said for a few moments, until the minister's wife, raising her face with

a new light of tender interest in it, bade Mistress Trench put the coffee on the table, and bring the oatmeal from its place before the fire. 'I hear Mr. Strome coming,' quoth she.

In fact, the eager energetic step of the vicar was now audible on the outer doorstep, and in a few moments the door opened breezily, and he came into the room.

He went quickly up to his wife, put one arm round her, and lovingly kissed the cheek that was lovingly upturned to him. Then he went round to his place at the opposite end of the table, and sat down. He said grace in a full-toned, vibrating voice ; and without more ado the meal began. Mrs. Strome occasionally glanced across at her husband, but said nothing ; and for a time he did not break the silence.

The entire man was an incarnation of self-forgetting enthusiasm ; his abstraction was proverbial ; but if you surprised its subject it invariably turned out to be something or somebody other than himself. The nervous

energy that stirred within him seemed to belie the thin grey hair that lay in soft disordered locks about his head. Beneath his straight forehead stood boldly forth an aquiline nose ; but its effect was modified by the exceeding sensitiveness of the mouth. His eyes, overshadowed by thick eyebrows, were made additionally expressive by the wrinkles that surrounded them—the hand-writing of life upon human faces, revealing with austere faithfulness the nobility or ignobility of the soul behind. His figure was slight ; his hands slender and restless—hands whose grasp on yours was fuller of meaning than a spoken greeting. He was a man towards whom confidence went forth like metal to the loadstone, because not only was he quick with charity, but he had kept fresh, through all the stress and strain of manhood, the guileless candour and ingenuousness of a child.



CHAPTER II.

A CONSULTATION.

HEN Mrs. Strome had poured out his coffee, and Barbara had brought it to him, the minister gave the latter leave to retire, which, not without manifest reluctance, she was fain to do. When the door had closed behind her, husband and wife looked in each other's eyes. They knew each other so well that they often used looks as a comprehensive sort of speech. Mrs. Strome gathered from this glance that her husband had had some adventure which touched his heart; not so unusual a circumstance after all. He had

pushed his chair a little back from the table, his clasped hands had fallen on his knee, and for a moment he appeared weary, aged, and sad.

‘I have been with poor Mrs. Jackson,’ he said presently. ‘There has been news about Fanny.’

Mrs. Strome, before speaking, laid her hands softly on some of the objects on the tea-tray in front of her, moving them into more orderly position, as if to establish a kind of external correspondence with the inward ordering of her thoughts. It was characteristic of her, as of many sincere and unaffected people, to give the like visible indications of the movements of her mind.

‘Is Fanny well?’ she asked at length.

‘I fear not—in any sense of the word,’ the minister answered. He knew the austerity of his wife’s attitude towards some forms of sin, and perhaps shrank a little from the prospect of arousing it in the present case. However, he must needs go on. ‘Some one who knew her happened to catch

sight of her in London a day or two ago. He was riding in an omnibus, and saw her from the window. She was looking pale and anxious. He thought, from her appearance, that she had suffered a foul wrong from some villain who has abandoned her—when she needed most support.'

The minister's face showed that he suffered acutely in saying this. The nerves beneath his thin cheeks and around his lips twitched and quivered, and his voice was dry in his throat. 'Poor little Fanny! I remember when I held her in my arms to christen her,' he said, grasping the edges of the table tightly with his hands.

Mrs. Strome had cast down her eyes, and a faint colour showed itself in her clear countenance. Her husband, apparently gazing fixedly through the window, was in reality away in London, holding out protecting hands to a sad drooping figure amidst the crowd; he was certainly not prepared for the question that brought him back to Cedarhurst:

‘How was Fanny dressed ?

‘She—why, Susan, I don’t know.’

‘I mean, Arthur, if she was dressed showily it would be more difficult for us to help her. She can have no money of her own.’

‘Oh, she wasn’t showily dressed ; she couldn’t have been, I’m sure,’ exclaimed the minister, with all the more earnestness because he had no particular grounds for his assurance. ‘Poor child, she must be destitute indeed,’ he murmured ; adding immediately : ‘Phillips can take my place at the Bible-class this afternoon. I’ll go directly up to London myself and see her.’ And he rose animatedly from his chair.

‘Have you her address, Arthur ?

The minister’s face fell ; he resumed his seat. ‘What a zany I am ! Oh, Susie, if I could only learn to think of everything, like you. No ; we know no more than I’ve told you.’

‘If she is in extremity I think she will write.’

This observation also had to travel a long way before it reached Mr. Strome's ears ; but his wife knew how to wait for him. He sat up and began fumbling in his pockets. ' Talking of writing, I met the postman outside, and he gave me the letters. There may be some news—who knows? No. Here is one for you, from Mary Dene. Ah ! this is from our dear boy. I suppose they'll explain each other, eh ?'

The vicar tore the envelope of his letter across, and let it fall to the ground ; Mrs. Strome cut hers open quietly with a knife, and put on her spectacles before she began to read. The husband muttered now and then to himself as he turned the pages brusquely one after the other ; the wife perused Miss Dene's handwriting with tranquil thoroughness, holding the paper daintily with the tips of her fingers.

' Sebastian is coming down here,' exclaimed Mr. Strome, looking up with the joyousness of a boy ; ' he'll be here on Friday.'

' Yes, Mary has decided to have her Christ-

mas-tree after all. She is very earnest that we should all be there.'

'Let us see ; to-day is Thursday, isn't it ?'

'Wednesday, Arthur.'

'True, so it is ; Saturday is Christmas Day —day after to-morrow. I think you will be able to manage it—that we shall, I mean—for an hour or so at all events. What a delight it will be, Susie, to see that splendid couple together ! I don't see why they shouldn't be as happy as we are when they're married. God grant they may !'

'I could not wish her anything better,' said Mrs. Strome softly.

'Dear wife ! Yes, Mary is a noble girl ; but I can hardly imagine any wife's being quite such a blessing to her husband as you have been to me all these thirty years Poor little Fanny !'

'If we succeed in finding out where Fanny is,' said Mrs. Strome, after a short silence, 'nothing could be better for her than to go to this new Home that Mary has established. Mary would take an interest in having her

there, Fanny having been formerly in her service.'

'Nothing could be better, indeed,' responded the vicar, feeling about abstractedly for the envelope of his letter. 'It was like you to think of that, Susie. Oh, I believe here's another letter in the bottom of this pocket. Yes. From some poor woman, who needs a little money, I suppose. . . . Ah ! thank God, thank God !'

Mrs. Strome looked up, and saw the light break out over her husband's face ; and she divined at once who must be the writer of this unexpected letter.

'From Fanny ? I thought she would send word.'

'Poor soul, what she has suffered !' murmured the vicar, reading and re-reading the drooping lines, and wholly absorbed in them for the time being. 'Oh, the villain ! how could he have the heart to do it ? "All alone"—yes, and—hem—"afraid to die in a hospital." No ; that, indeed, she shall not. Susie, I will go to her at once.'

‘Does she give the name of the man who——’

‘The villain who betrayed her? No, no; a girl like Fanny would sooner die than do that,’ exclaimed Mr. Strome warmly. ‘No, he’s abandoned her; she’s alone with her sin and her burden; but she won’t tell. I’m glad I do not know him, wife. I could not keep my hands from taking him by the throat. The man’s heart must be flint.’ Here the minister’s voice faltered; his own heart being manifestly made of quite other substance.

‘Is it just, Arthur, to make such a distinction between his sin and hers?’

‘Oh, wife! Think of poor little defenceless, unsuspecting Fanny——’

‘Dear husband, let me say this,’ interposed Mrs. Strome, with the resolute, yet tremulous courage which she was wont to oppose to the vicar’s passionate and often hasty and mistaken impulses: ‘God has left no young girl without defence against deeds that destroy her purity; and the unsuspicuousness that leads to actual sin, is little better than a wilful

'shutting of the eyes. You feel so much affection and pity for Fanny because you held her in your arms at her baptism——'

'It is not that; it is not that only, Susie,' exclaimed Mr. Strome, getting up from his chair and coming round to her side of the table; 'but she is a woman.'

The wife took her husband's hand in her delicate grasp, as he stood beside her, perturbed and restless. 'Women are weak in many ways,' said she; 'but in some they are stronger than men. I think Fanny—or any woman—could have saved herself if she would. I don't think that she is less to blame than the man. Would you think she was, Arthur, if he were some one you knew as you do her?'

'If he had been my own brother—if he had been my own son——' the minister began vehemently, but checked himself; adding in an inward tone: 'No, you are right, you are just. My charity is but a blind partiality and prejudice. Ah, Susie, what should I be without you?'

‘You could never be anything but the noblest man on earth, my husband,’ returned Mrs. Strome proudly and tenderly, as he raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. ‘But your generosity makes you sometimes separate the sin altogether from the sinner; and I am as far the other way, for it is hard for me to separate them at all. And I fear that, if any one I loved and trusted greatly were to be guilty of a great sin, I should find less forgiveness for him than for a stranger. I should have been a very hateful old woman, Arthur, if I had not been your wife.’

Arthur Strome looked down upon his wife with a sort of arch astonishment at this speech: he had never been able to entertain the idea that she could be anything less than a born angel. Nor, apparently, did he now consider her self-depreciation worthy even of being refuted, for after a few moments’ pause he reverted to the original question.

‘But don’t you think I ought to go to London, Sue?’

‘Why should not I go? You have more

than enough to do here, and you might not be able to get back to-night.'

'Oh, it would never do to have you go hunting about the slums of London; and, besides, I'm afraid you—I mean, Fanny might—'

'I would not be harsh with her, Arthur, indeed,' said Mrs. Strome, with a little quiver in her voice. 'I know that, but for the mercy of the Lord, I might be as much in need of pity and forgiveness as she. Don't think I would not do all I could for her.'

'I know you would, Sue; and when she has been brought here, I know you will. But the bringing her here is a man's work; and who but I could do that?'

'Is it quite certain that she will be willing to come? Some women would rather die than face the people who knew them before their disgrace.'

'Oh, she will come. I can make her see why she should come. She has not herself only to think of now, poor girl; she has that sacred responsibility on her that even the

most hardened woman cannot wholly neglect ; and she isn't hardened—she can't be hardened—no, no !

Mrs. Strome took the letter and read it—not without a perceptible constraint laid upon herself. ' I should judge from this,' she said, putting it down, ' that she wished rather to be helped where she is, than to be brought back to Cedarhurst.'

' The truth is, she doesn't know what she wants, except sympathy, and some friendly voice to speak to her, and neither to insult her nor condemn her. She feels herself drifting away from everything trustworthy and good, and she sends forth this involuntary cry for succour. Oh, if our Sebastian were but in my place now ! What a heart and strength he would bring to this work.'

Mrs. Strome saw things with rare clearness and impartiality when they were placed before her ; but she was almost entirely wanting in that teeming fertility of suggestion and resource which was one of her husband's characteristics. Consequently his next proposal,

made as it was with all his customary abruptness and vehemence of conviction, gave her something of a start.

‘What difference need that make?’ he exclaimed. ‘Why should he have to wait for me? What a blockhead I have been! I’ll write him to go to her at once! And how conveniently it happens, too, that he should be coming down here just at this time for Mary Dene’s reception! He will bring Fanny with him. He is the man of all others, isn’t he, Sue? And I remember he always took an interest in the poor child.’

The good vicar, walking up and down the room in his excitement, pressing his hands together or opening them outwards ardently, had not yet looked at his wife; but when at length he did so, he was perplexed to find her not altogether so well-satisfied as himself.

‘Do you think it would be wise, Arthur? His having formerly taken an interest about her would make it doubly painful for him; and he is but a young man, after all, without the protection or authority of a fixed position.’

‘ Human beings must not wait for a position to succour one another,’ returned the minister. He sat down before his wife, leaning forward with his hands clasped between his knees, and his face illumined. ‘ Sebastian is a Christian and a gentleman, and that will safeguard him. Yes ; the task will be painful, but it will be wholesome too. It’s not enough for a man, whose calling is to be the saving of souls, to theorise and argue merely about sin : he must look in its very face, and feel its deadly breath in the air.’

‘ But is not that almost like saying that a man ought to commit sin in order to learn how hideous it is ?’

‘ Heaven forbid I should say that, though men like Saint Augustine may have needed such a death-struggle to rouse the angel in them ; men by nature proud, passionate, and powerful, who could be made to acknowledge their personal helplessness only by their personal fall. But our Sebastian, thank God ! doesn’t need that awful experience ; he is, if anything, too fastidious and refined ; the

grossness and ugliness of sin, not to speak of its wickedness, would suffice to repel him. The only danger I have ever feared for him is that his heart won't ache and bleed enough for those who stumble in the mire ; it will be well for him to learn that he can't touch his neighbour's heart with anything less precious than his own. So, I say, let him go to this girl whom he knew in her innocence, and see with his own eyes what sin has brought her to.'

'Sebastian's reserve and self-control sometimes make him appear unsympathetic and cold, but he is not really so ; he is as full of fire as Saint Augustine,' said the mother, still unsatisfied. 'But it was not of him I was thinking so much as of Fanny. He is both too high-minded and too humble for vulgar evil to harm him. I love and trust him next to you in the world, Arthur. But how could Fanny endure that her disgrace should be revealed to one so near her own age ?'

'Oh, he's older than I in some ways,' answered the minister, smiling ; 'and charity

has no age. Besides, she will look upon him as a being of a superior order, not as a young man with whom she could measure herself in any way. That needn't hinder.'

'Perhaps,' said Mrs. Strome, after a pause, 'this is a question which neither of us have a right to decide alone. Mary Dene is to be his wife, and it seems to me she ought to be consulted. She might object to it, and if she does—— Don't you think she had better be asked ?'

'You are right—you are right, Susie, as always !' exclaimed the husband, getting up and beginning to button his coat. 'I'll walk over and see about it this very morning, for there's no time to lose ; and if she objects, then, as you say, there shall be an end of it. But I hope she won't—I think she won't.'

'I think so, too, after you have talked to her,' said Mrs. Strome, looking up demurely.

The minister kissed his wife, and laughed.

'No ; I promise not to be persistent and argumentative. I'll put the question in the baldest way. I won't even let her know that

her decision is to be final. There ! isn't that liberal ?

Mrs. Strome smiled back at him, but made no reply.

'I look like a fool, to be questioning your judgment,' he said, pausing. 'Are you quite sure I'm wrong, Sue ?'

'My husband, you are wiser than I, for you are nearer heaven,' she answered, rising and putting her arms round his arm, and her grey head against his shoulder. 'I believe that what you do will be right. Go to Mary, and say to her all you have said to me.'

So the Reverend Mr. Strome set forth on his errand to Dene Hall ; and the wife and mother sat a silent hour in the eastern parlour, gazing out beneath the dark boughs of the cedars towards London, her hands folded on the open Bible in her lap.



CHAPTER III.

DENE HALL.

ENE HALL was a mile and a half distant from Cedarhurst Vicarage—not counting the half-mile of avenue; and there will be time, while the Reverend Arthur Strome is walking these two miles, to give you some notion about the place and people he is going to see.

The house looks its best under the slanting beams of an afternoon sun, which bring out the warm ruddy hue of its Elizabethan brick walls, and casts afar the shadows of its fantastic chimneys. It encloses a square court, with an arched cloister; and a fountain

plashes into a circular basin in the central grass-plot. It stands on a sort of artificial plateau, some six or seven feet above the level of the surrounding park, the boundaries being built up solidly with stone, and the descent from the higher to the lower level being accomplished by flights of broad steps. This raised area, some ten acres in extent, is laid out in elaborate gardens. Along the front of the house extends a broad gravelled walk, and from a point in front of the main entrance four straight paths radiate fanlike, bordered with thick yew-trees, which, in the brightest sunshine, seem to retain in their foliage the gloom of night. Between, spread broad lawns of fathomless turf; huge carven vases mounted on pedestals occupy the corners of the walks, their grey outlines softened by the sprays of creeping plants which have been planted in them. The flower-beds are replanted every two or three weeks, and their hues graduated and patterned out according to the latest refinements of chromic art; and there are grey stone benches

among the rhododendrons, whence this painting in petals may be enjoyed at leisure.

Under the southern wing of the house a smaller walled-in garden is kept in the Queen Anne style. Here the eye follows down rigid vistas, till it rests upon a rococo statue at the farther end; the paths are bordered by narrow rims of white stone, and the trees are pruned into shapes of monstrous regularity. Nature seems to have donned ruff and farthingale, and to be stepping on high-heeled shoes. In a circular open space at the centre stands a sun-dial a hundred and fifty years old, whose green bronze disk, engraved with a medley of astronomic and astrologic signs, still tells the hours when they are sunny. A gigantic wisteria is trained against a southern wall, its clusters of faded-purple blossoms filling the air with fragrance, and in the warmest weather a dozen orange-trees in boxes are ranged along the terrace, and small green and yellow oranges venture forth on the boughs, and try to pretend that they fancy themselves

in Italy. It is a wonderful garden for sentiment.

The great park outside, with its three thousand rolling acres of turf and brake, is diversified with clumps of burly oaks and ancient distorted thorns ; and a stately avenue, half a mile in length, bordered with towering horse-chestnuts, and lime-trees, three deep on either hand, leads up to the Hall. Beautifully does the sunshine filter down through the deep boughs and gild the shadow-haunted turf beneath ; and when, far down the green corridors, a group of deer with slender limbs and poised antlers halt to gaze at the approaching visitor, the world seems almost too gracious to be true.

But unfortunately in no part of England that has yet been discovered do June and July last all the year round ; and even Dene Hall in December is not altogether so paradiacal a spot as in the leafy months. Naked boughs and grey immitigable heavens make the broad park dreary ; and although the Hall itself, thanks to its lofty site, never falls

into that state of mouldy dampness which besets so many English country-seats, yet cheerfulness is a thing which not even gravel and drainage always suffice to ensure. The best way to enjoy December weather here, as elsewhere in Britain, is to stay within doors before a big fire and try to forget all about it.

Such is, or was, Dene Hall, whose foundations were laid by Sir Richard, the grandsire of the first baronet, in the middle of the sixteenth century, and which has never once passed from the possession of the family. The last male child destined to bear the name was born in 1795, and died the year before our story opens. Sir Hubert's will bequeathed to his only child, Mary, his entire personal and landed property without reserve—Lady Martha Dene having been dead many years—and she thereby became the richest heiress in the county. Inasmuch as she was handsome and accomplished into the bargain, that valuable class of persons who do their neighbour's prudence for him, opined that

the estate should have been afforded some sort of security against the wiles of fortune-hunters.

‘What,’ cried Mrs. Musk-Mandalay, thinking of her five-foot-seven of unbaked, sandy-haired male offspring, ‘what, my dear major, is to prevent the first immoral Frenchified adventurer that comes along from bamboozling that headstrong girl, and stealing away that superb property from those who deserve to possess it?’ And the melancholy major shook his head.

It is possible, however, that Sir Hubert Dene, who was not a fool, did not draw up his will in so reckless a manner as Mrs. Musk-Mandalay supposed. He had enjoyed ample opportunities for studying his daughter’s character, and may have acted with an eye to the knowledge he imagined himself to have acquired of it. She had been her father’s constant companion ever since her seventh year, and he had taught her many things not included in the ordinary feminine curriculum. She could not only saddle her horse and ride it, but she could exchange it for a better at a

horse-fair. She could mow a field, drain it, plough it, and rotate its crops. She could bring a pheasant down with a gun, as well as cook and carve it. She could not only listen to gentlemen's small-talk in the parlour, but she could oversee workmen digging a well or building a wall, and discourse such sense to them as to make their ears tingle. She could as easily instruct the London solicitors—Messrs. Fry and Griddle—when to sell stock and when to hold on to it, as she could check the housekeeper's weekly account. She was not very skilful at trilling Italian airs, or warbling French chansons, but she could sing a hymn in a way to make your heart beat. When she walked about the grounds she did not hitch herself along by her shoulders, with her skirts in one hand, her parasol in another, and her elbows in her ribs; but she stepped out boldly, on elastic feet nine inches long, and with her arms hanging at her sides, like Juno's in the Greek statue. She had the full use of all her limbs.

Once, as she was returning home after pruning some trees in a neighbouring preserve, with her axe in her hand, and dressed in a dark serge gown, with a thick quilted under-petticoat of scarlet cloth, she was chased into a corner by a bull. As she ran she loosened the petticoat, and, watching her chance, stripped it off in a moment, and cleverly tossed it on the animal's horns as he was charging her. At the same time she sprang to one side, and as he passed brought down her keen hatchet just behind his ears, and tumbled the huge creature dead at her feet.

This deed of prowess was witnessed by Sir Hubert, the gamekeeper, and another man, as they were racing headlong across the adjoining field to her assistance. The bull was a prize animal, valued at five hundred guineas; and Sir Hubert, after heartily thanking God for his child's safety, turned to the gamekeeper, and said, with a rueful twinkle in his eye :

‘After all, Wilkins, you see, we were

not in time to save him! He's quite dead.'

Miss Mary overheard this remark and the laugh which followed it.

'No bull or anything else shall chase me across a field and live to tell of it,' said she very grimly. 'If I hadn't killed him this afternoon, I would have shot him this evening. Wilkins, give me my petticoat.'

And yet a mouse or a bat had the power to thoroughly terrify this redoubtable young woman; and she was a firm believer in apparitions, which she had never seen, and in omens, which she saw everywhere.

On her nineteenth birthday she shut herself up in her room, and cried there for seven hours, off and on, because she had boxed the ears of her favourite maid, Fanny Jackson, for telling a fact which she (Mary) believed at the moment to be a falsehood. A bouquet had been sent, addressed to Miss Dene, and she had somehow taken it into her head that it was the gift of Sebastian Strome. Fanny, the maid, affirmed that it came from young Mr.

Musk-Mandalay, and suffered for her truthfulness as above intimated. Well, when at the end of the seven hours Mary Dene came out of her room she called Fanny to her and humbly begged her pardon. This having been accorded, with many asseverations of affection, Miss Dene next handed the girl a year's advance wages and a written testimonial of character. 'You must go to-morrow, Fanny,' said she. 'I shall miss you more than you will miss me; but I won't have any one staying in my house whom I have unjustly insulted!' Fanny was fain to obey; and this was the first and last occasion on which the heiress of Dene Hall so forgot herself with a servant.

It would be easy to multiply anecdotes of her girlhood; but enough has been said. After this nineteenth birthday she began to grow rather more orthodox. 'We shall civilise her in time,' said Lady Featherstone (who had been, though the circumstance had quite slipped her memory, the daughter of Madame Marigolde, the once famous milliner

of Old Bond Street). ‘There is good material in Mary, and I am sanguine we shall be able to make her up into something quite *distinguée*.’ Miss Dene, in short, began to give up tramping about the farm, and taking the spade and scythe from the hands of the labourers. She recognised, though late, the fact, that it was as a woman and a lady, and not as a man, that she must take her place and show an example in society ; and so, without useless repinings, though not, perhaps, without some reasonable regrets, she set herself to the task.

She went up to London and had some dresses made ; and it was then discovered for the first time, by every one except Sir Hubert, who had known it all along, that her figure and bearing were as noble as her face. She attended church regularly to hear the Reverend Arthur Strome preach ; partly, no doubt, to show her bonnet ; partly, from religious motives — though she had never been given to theological bigotry ; partly, in the interests of social order, of which she had

always been a staunch supporter ; but chiefly by reason of her thorough-going and reverent affection for the vicar and his wife. She idolised those two persons with all the ardour of an outwardly cool and reserved nature. They sympathised with her, and understood her as no one else did ; for the generality of her acquaintance regarded her as proud, cold, hard-headed, masculine, and so forth. Even her patroness, Lady Featherstone, admitted that she was 'a bit antiquated yet ;' while Mrs. Musk-Mandalay openly declared her opinion that the heiress of Dene Hall was 'aughtry.'

But to win her friendship and cause her to respect yours, it was necessary either to be very sincere and single-minded, or to possess a really great genius. She loved the Reverend Arthur Strome on the former account, as she would have loved a Mirabeau or a Napoleon on the latter. The surest way to influence her was not to wheedle but to command her ; and she could best be commanded by truth and power.

Her father's death, occurring at the close of her twentieth year, matured her character. Her features, which were of the antique Roman type, easily assumed an air of gravity ; she did not look like a mere unmarried girl, scarcely out of her teens. Indeed, however feminine may have been the secret qualities of her heart and soul, her intellectual part seemed less that of a woman than of a man. She had had the freedom of her father's library, and she read enough there to open her eyes to some of the infirmities and diseases of the social fabric, and had pondered over those old problems that have puzzled all ages until she fancied that she could devise solutions of most of them. She was not shy of speaking about them to what she supposed were fitting ears, and astounded more than one humdrum old dowager by the straightforward composure of her comments upon matters deeply affecting the welfare of mankind ; while her friend, the vicar, and Doctor Stemper, the physician of the neighbourhood, found that they could consult with

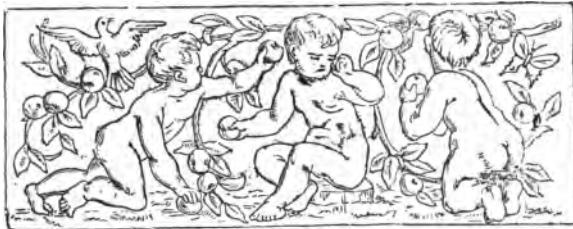
Miss Dene quite as frankly as with the late Sir Hubert about the condition and needs of the parish. Should it be inferred from this that the young lady was less pure-minded than became a daughter of the English aristocracy, I can only say that one look from her full, slow-turning brown eyes would have dissipated the most fastidious misgivings. But hers was a large nature which could not satisfy itself with a life of effeminate jots and tittles.

Her widowed maternal aunt, Mrs. Fawley, was invited down to live at the Hall after Sir Hubert's decease. She had been Miss Sophia Cambrey, second daughter of the Honourable Gambleton Cambrey, brother of Lord Welshford. Joshua Fawley, the hero of her young affections, had been a good-looking young Hebrew, belonging to the younger branch of a highly respectable family in the City. But Mr. Cambrey did not approve of the match ; and the handsome Joshua was rash enough to suggest an elopement. The idea perfectly suited Sophia's romantic nature, and it was success-

fully carried out. But the marriage turned out badly. Joshua had no money of his own, though his uncle the banker was wealthy enough ; and his involuntary father-in-law would have nothing to say to him. Thinking that it might be his Judaism that was the difficulty, Joshua took an early opportunity of becoming a convert to the doctrines of the Church of England ; but fate thereupon played a counter-stroke and lost him the game. The Honourable Gambleton Cambrey had staked everything that he possessed against his horse Ab Gwylim, the favourite for one of the great handicaps of that year. He saw Ab Gwylim pass the winning-post first by a length ; and five minutes afterwards he retired into a private chamber connected with the grand stand, and there blew out his venerable brains (he was near seventy at the time). Ten minutes after that it transpired that Ab Gwylim, not having carried the proper weight, had not won after all. But the news came too late to do Mr. Cambrey any good—or Joshua Fawley either.

The latter gentleman went abroad with his wife, and very little was seen or heard of them for some twelve years. Lord Welshford occasionally sent them money, and so, it may be hoped, did their uncle the banker. At last Mrs. Fawley reappeared in England, a widow and childless. She was provided with a decent maintenance by her relatives ; and occasionally made long visits to her 'darling brother-in-law, Sir Hubert.' It seemed natural, therefore, that she should be selected as companion for her orphaned niece. She was a lean, unctuous, graceful woman, with an insinuating smile and handsome instep, both of which she was fond of exhibiting. Her face had also been handsome once, but now the whites of her eyes were brown, and her skin yellow and criss-crossed with innumerable fine wrinkles. She suffered from neuralgic headaches, and took morphia and the like drugs to relieve them. She, however, filled her post in the Hall admirably, displaying surprising tact in her behaviour to Mary, and often showing an amusing wit in her remarks

upon persons visiting the house. Upon the whole the elderly lady and the young one got on together better than could have been expected of two natures so radically unsympathetic.



CHAPTER IV.

CHECK !



T this period Miss Dene received a great deal of sentimental attention from the bachelors in the vicinity, both the young ones, and those not so young ; but such was the singularity of her behaviour under this infliction, that of all who presented themselves with intentions, two only mustered resolution sufficient to make an explicit declaration thereof. The heiress entirely failed to show a proper feeling under the circumstances ; she was too much for her suitors ; she disconcerted them. When it came to putting their fate to the touch they too much

feared it, and so lost it all. It was found impossible to get up what is known as an interesting conversation with the young woman. Her talk was of cattle, of sub-soiling, or of her schemes for a local Home for destitute women and children. The difficulty of giving a tender turn to topics like these is obvious, and to break baldly in upon them with an avowal of passion would be a suicidal absurdity. Aunt Sophia contributed to the discomfiture of the aspirants by good-humoured but telling ridicule ; until by degrees one after another dropped away, and the field was left clear to the pair of unterrified ones above alluded to.

The first of these was Mr. Selim Fawley, who possessed the formidable advantage of Aunt Sophia's support. Whether she gave this out of the pure love of her heart for her young nephew, or whether for this and something else, we need not now inquire. Being the son of David Fawley, Esq.—the elder brother of Joshua, and a partner in the banking-house—he was a sort of second or

third cousin of Mary's and was considered a very eligible match. He had taken high honours at Oxford, and after finishing his education on the Continent, had come up to London and mingled with highly respectable society there. His person was handsome, his address pleasing, and his expenditure profuse. As for his Jewish proclivities, they must have been of the mildest sort, for he had been known to devour a pork-pie at a railway-station, and had not seldom escorted Miss Dene and Aunt Sophia to church, where he had listened with devout attention to Mr. Strome's sermons. He was a member of some of the most fashionable clubs in London, and his name was among the candidates for several more. Finally, he was unaffectedly desirous to marry Miss Dene, and paid his attentions in the most assiduous and flattering manner.

His only rival was Sebastian Strome, and it was not until almost the last moment that the latter was known to have entered the lists at all. Mary Dene and he had been

acquaintances since childhood, but neither of them had ever betrayed a disposition to become anything more. Moreover, during the last year or so Sebastian had been generally in London, where he was pursuing his studies in divinity ; and when he came down to Cedarhurst, he had other things to do than to make calls on the heiress. But of course it is unsafe to assert, on the testimony of outward behaviour, what may be the secrets of the heart ; and certainly Mr. Selim Fawley and Aunt Sophia would have done well not to rely, in this instance, on appearances.

Fawley and Strome had once been great friends, inseparable at Rugby and during the first year or two of their Oxford career ; but then there occurred a quarrel, or at least a coolness. They were no longer seen in each other's company, Strome never vouchsafed any explanation of the change ; but it was commonly believed—and Fawley did not deny it—that the breach had been occasioned by some rivalry in scholarship, in which Strome had come off second best. After-

wards, when, as often happened, they met in clubs or drawing-rooms, they noticed each other with civility, but never had any conversation together. There was no cordiality, but neither was there any perceptible animosity ; they simply agreed to let each other alone, and make no fuss about it.

The rumours of Fawley's infatuation for Miss Dene, and of her not unfavourable attitude towards him, were not long in reaching the ears of Mr. and Mrs. Strome, and gave them no pleasure. Not that they had anything against Fawley ; but it had long been the unuttered wish of their hearts that Mary should become Sebastian's wife. One day, Sebastian having come down from London for a week's holiday, the subject of the anticipated match happened to be broached at the dinner-table.

'Fawley is a lucky fellow,' said Mr. Strome. 'There will never be another Mary Dene.'

'What has that to do with his luck?' in-

quired Sebastian, looking up with his quiet, inscrutable face.

‘It is said they are going to marry, my son ; haven’t you heard it?’ said Mrs. Strome.

Sebastian filled his wine-glass, and remarked : ‘Well, Fawley was always a good-looking young gentleman.’

‘If that were all, I suspect she thinks you as good-looking as he is!’ said the minister, with a laugh.

‘Me! What does an unhatched curate want with a wife?’

‘What, indeed, Susan?’ rejoined the father, smiling at his wife. ‘Why did you and I never happen to think of that?’

‘I should have liked my son to marry some such woman as Mary,’ said Mrs. Strome, folding her white hands against the table.

‘Well, mother, since you wish it, I will,’ said Sebastian, and drank off his wine. But the words were not taken seriously.

Either by accident or intention, however, and without saying anything about it to his

father and mother, Sebastian Strome spent a part of every day of this week at Dene Hall. Aunt Sophia found that he had a great deal to say to Mary on the subject of the new Home, but she did not think it necessary to make a third at their conversations ; there was nothing more to be apprehended from this impassive young man than from Dr. Stemper, or from his own father. Besides, he always treated the elderly but still coquettish gentlewoman with a chivalrous gentleness that put it out of her power to be other than well-disposed towards him. On the last day but one before the time fixed for his return to London, she said to him, when he sought her out in the garden to bid her good-evening :

‘Really, I don’t know what we should have done without you this week, with Selim away : luckily he’ll be back to-morrow.’

‘Mary is a good girl, and much improved of late, under your care. Fawley deserved all the congratulations he will get. Is the date of the marriage settled yet ?’

‘Why, as to that, you see, there’s the formality of the proposal to be gone through with first,’ said Mrs. Fawley, playing among the fallen leaves with her arched slipper. ‘We ladies mustn’t think about the wedding-day, until after our swains have asked us in so many words whether we’ll be married.’

‘I haven’t mentioned the subject to Mary, as she didn’t introduce it; but you will give her my kind wishes whenever the right time comes? You mustn’t let your nephew be a laggard,’ he added, smiling.

‘Oh! my trouble has been to keep him from going too fast. Mary is not like other girls—she won’t be driven. However, to-morrow—but this is a great secret!’

‘From whom?’

‘From everybody; even Mary herself doesn’t know it yet. To-morrow, at three o’clock, he is to come here and make his offer. There, sir! See how favoured you are.’

‘We clerical gentlemen know how to deal with ladies’ confidences, Mrs. Fawley. Well,

good-night. I shall try and get up here to-morrow evening to leave those designs for smoke-flues for the chimneys of Mary's Home—that is, unless I shall be in the way ?'

' You know you can never be in the way ! Besides, Selim cannot stay later than till five o'clock ; he has to take the evening train to London.'

' Whether he is accepted or not ?'

' They are going to make him a partner in the bank, you see ; and to-morrow night they are all to meet at dinner, and get it settled. But, of course, there is really no doubt about her accepting him. I know the dear child's heart so well !'

' A lucky fellow, Fawley—always was,' remarked Strome musingly : ' and luckiest of all now, to have you for an ally. I wish I could count on a friend like you, when the time comes for me to fall in love,' he added, taking her hand ; ' only in that case I might happen to fall in love with the friend instead of the—object !'

'Oh, you naughty boy! you will never need an ally to help you out in your love-making,' returned Mrs. Fawley, looking up at him with that pose of the head that so well became her: 'that tongue of yours, and that voice, are allies enough and to spare. There! I protest it's too bad of you to be standing there and making fun of a poor vain old woman; and with a laugh, and a playful pat with the flower she held in her hand, she dismissed him, and he departed.

The next afternoon Selim duly made his appearance; and he and Mary Dene had a rather prolonged interview in the drawing-room.

He came out at length, alone; and Aunt Sophia, joining him with an interrogative expression, noticed that his face was not altogether so radiant as it should have been.

'How is it, dear boy?' she inquired.

'She says she'll let me know to-morrow.'

'Oh, but you should have made her say Yes to-day.'

'Get your hat, and come across the short

cut with me. Of course, I did what I could, and she was kind enough ; but hang it ! she seems to have changed somehow in the last week.'

'The trouble is, I fancy, that you showed too much anxiety. When a woman feels she has power, she likes to use it.'

'It's deuced inconvenient. What am I to say to-night ?'

'My dear boy, don't you fret ! She'll be all right to-morrow.'

'But they expect me to be able to promise my twenty thousand by the first of January ; and how am I to do that, unless I know that she will marry me in December ?'

'You can as good as promise it ; and if the worst comes to the worst, you will always be as well off as you are now.'

Selim pushed out his red under-lip, and drew his wide and short black eyebrows together discontentedly. 'You know our interests are the same, Sophia,' said he, looking round and fixing his small dark-brown eyes upon her. 'If I lose her, you

lose your chance of an annuity. You must back me up for your sake as well as mine.'

'Selim dear, do you think I need any other inducement than my affection for you? But I tell you there's no danger. She has told me herself that she believes you are the only man who cares for her on her own account.'

'Well, and so I do care for her. By-the-way, I hear Sebastian Strome has been here.'

'Pooh, my dear! Do you suppose she would think of a creature with four hundred a year? Besides, they never cared twopence for each other.'

'Ah! you don't know Sebastian Strome as I do. He could make himself Archbishop of Canterbury if he chose. However, he'll be too late to make mischief in this business, I suppose. But mind and keep him out of the way until all's settled.'

'Trust me!' said Aunt Sophia reassuringly, and reflecting that at that very moment, perhaps, Strome might be on his way to the Hall. They had walked nearly half a mile

during this conversation. 'I think I'll be going back, dear boy,' said she; 'and mind you are here as early as you can manage it to-morrow.'

They parted, and Aunt Sophia hastily retraced her steps along the narrow path, and should have regained the house in seven or eight minutes. Unfortunately, however, in passing through one of the oak-tree groves, she caught her pretty foot in a creeping root, and fell forward. As she came down on a mass of soft turf and ferns, she was not much hurt so far as that went; but she felt immediately that she had sprained her ankle. It was not a very bad sprain, but she was still a third of a mile from home; and making what speed she could, three-quarters of an hour elapsed before she had covered the distance. It was then six o'clock.

She hobbled into the drawing-room, and found Mary there, apparently asleep, with her face against the sofa-cushion. The girl raised her head, however, and smiled, without

seeming quite to know what she was smiling at. Aunt Sophia dropped into a chair with a groan. It was at all events satisfactory that there were no signs of Strome having been there. She looked at Mary, and noticed that her cheeks were wet, and that there was a lovely softness in her great Junonian eyes.

‘Oh, my darling, I am suffering so! I stumbled over a nasty root, and sprained my poor ankle. I thought I should have to spend the night in the park.’

Mary’s gaze rested upon her, but there was a dreamy abstraction in it. She had risen, and was standing with her back to the window, languid, softened, superb; a ray of the afternoon sunshine fell upon her hair, and made a red gold halo round her head. She was hardly aware of the present; she was living in the hour that had just gone by.

‘Yes—I am very glad—sorry. Oh, auntie, he has been here, and I am so happy!’ and to her relative’s vast surprise the young Juno came forward, and laid her warm

white arms about her neck, kissed her yellow cheek, and proceeded to cry gently on her shoulder.

‘Well, nothing could be better than this!’ said Aunt Sophia to herself, as soon as her surprise allowed her to think; ‘and Selim was a goose to be anxious, just as I told him.’ And she proceeded to murmur all manner of sympathetic and appropriate phrases into her niece’s ear.

But Mary Dene heard none of them: the voice of an emotion hitherto unknown filled her ears. She did not know that her aunt had sprained her ankle; she had forgotten that such a person as Selim Fawley existed; she was scarcely even aware that she was crying on her aunt’s shoulder. She had fallen into a divine dream, wherein new sight and new senses were opened to her—a dream from which she wished never to awake to the old dull-eyed indifference. And when, at length, Aunt Sophia hobbled off to her room, to embrocate her ankle and congratulate herself on the fortunate aspect of affairs,

Mary, left to the unlonely solitude of her heart, wandered into the old garden, and paced the prim paths, and put her lips against the drowsy sweetness of the September roses, and gazed at the red sun, sinking earthwards in a peaceful glory that seemed like sympathy from heaven. Gradually shadows crept over the earth; but then the stars took up the tale of the girl's happiness. She paused by the old sun-dial, leaned her arms on it, and pillow'd her cheek upon them. Time had ceased to record itself upon that mystic disk, as upon her own soul. Suddenly she started, with a low shriek of horror! A bat, flitting swiftly along the twilight, had brushed her face with its noiseless wing. The sacredness and the harmony were dispelled; and the girl hastened back to the house, never to dream that wondrous dream again.

Next morning, at the breakfast-table, Aunt Sophia had the gratification of listening to a full explanation of her niece's distraught behaviour the previous afternoon. But we shall do better to hear the briefer disclosure

which was made, about the same hour, at Cedarhurst Vicarage.

Sebastian Stromé, who was to return to London by the morning train, having finished his egg and driven his spoon through the bottom of it, remarked: 'Fawley is not going to marry Mary Dene, after all.'

'Indeed! When did you hear that?' exclaimed the vicar, setting down the coffee-cup which he had been in the act of raising to his mouth.

'At the Hall, yesterday afternoon. She is going to be married, though.'

'What a strange—— To whom?'

Sebastian rolled up his napkin and laid it down on the table with a quiet tap, composedly meeting, the while, his parents' questioning looks.

'To me!' he said. 'You recommended me some such girl, mother; and since no other such girl seemed to be available, I took Mary herself.'

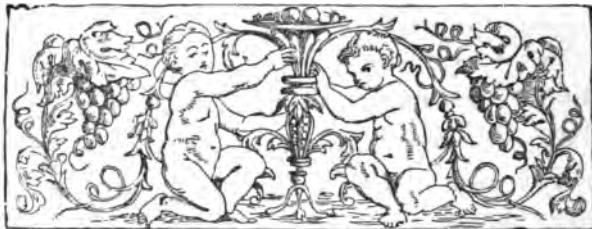
When Mr. Selim Fawley arrived at the

Hall, at eleven o'clock, he was met by Aunt Sophia, and after a prolonged interview with her, retired without seeing Mary Dene. But the next day came an admirable letter from him, expressing his best wishes for the lady's happiness, together with a generous and really quite noble recognition of his rival's talents and virtues. It concluded with a hope that Miss Dene would continue to receive him on a friendly footing, and he trusted his conduct would justify her condescension.

‘Poor fellow! I could never have loved him, but it will be a privilege to have such a friend,’ was Mary’s comment to her aunt on this epistle; and she added immediately, ‘Oh, auntie, I do love him so!’ But Mrs. Fawley knew what she meant this time. That worthy woman had taken the line of sympathising ardently with her niece’s choice, and thereby came in for a great many valuable confidences.

As for society, of course it called Mary Dene a fool, and Sebastian Strome a fortune-

hunter; but neither of them seemed to mind that. All these things occurred some three or four months before the date at which our story begins.



CHAPTER V.

AN EMBARRASSMENT.

HE morning of the minister's visit to Dene Hall had not begun very pleasantly for Mary Dene. She had received by the early post an anonymous letter.

Although without date and signature, it was in other respects all that a business letter ought to be. It was written in a legible business hand, and was brief and to the point. 'Miss Mary Dene,' it ran, 'the address of a former servant of yours, Fanny Jackson, is Number Ninety-seven, Falkirk Road, Camden Town. It will be to your

interest to make immediate inquiries about her.'

Miss Dene opened and read this missive at her toilet-table, handling it rather gingerly. It made her cheeks grow a trifle pale at first, and her heart beat faster for a stroke or two, for she had never forgotten Fanny, or ceased to feel responsibility on her account. After the pallor came a flush of haughty resentment at the liberty taken in thus addressing her. Finally, she put the letter down, and sat in thought, her thick hair falling over her white shoulders, and her eyes cast down.

When, several months after her dismissal of Fanny, the girl had left her home secretly, leaving behind her only a few lines to say that she was 'going to be happy,' Mary had charged herself with some degree of blame for the catastrophe; for if she had not lost her temper, and unjustly boxed Fanny's ears, Fanny might still have been in her service, and if in her service she would not have been likely to go wrong. This was a tolerably straightforward syllogism, and had Mary's

been a morbid temperament it might seriously have disturbed her peace of mind. Certainly she would have given almost anything to have saved Fanny from her disgrace ; and, should opportunity ever offer, she would do what she could to put her in the way to retrieve it.

But she had reflected that 'there must, after all, have been in Fanny a latent tendency to wrong, which would in all probability have made itself felt sooner or later. Her mistress's fondness for her had been the result rather of the personal attractiveness of the girl's manner and appearance than of any special aptitude that she showed for her duties. Beyond a pretty face and a graceful figure, a light deft hand and a native sweetness of disposition, Fanny had been in no way superior to the ordinary run of ladies' maids. She was prone to idleness, to forgetfulness, even to occasional prevarication ; her habits were not orderly; and she was somewhat over-fond of dashing and coquettish costumes. Moreover, on leaving Dene Hall,

with a letter of hearty recommendation in her pocket, and thirty pounds advance wages, she did not trouble herself to seek a new situation, but went home to her father and mother, who idolised and spoilt her, and entirely approved of the intention she announced of taking a good long rest. In their opinion it was just what the poor dear needed.

One of Fanny's first acts of repose was to take a trip up to London to see her cousins —Mr. Jackson had a married sister living at Hammersmith—and when she came back she was wearing a stylish new bonnet and mantilla, with gloves and boots to suit. This display gained her the envy of all the tradesmen's daughters in Cedarhurst, who not only had not thirty pounds to dress on, but, given the clothes, would still have lacked Fanny's air and figure to set them off. Fanny, perhaps, found some compensation for their ill-will in the undisguised admiration of all the tradesmen's sons; and also, as was afterwards remembered against her, in the flattering

importunities of a certain handsome recruiting-sergeant, who was at that time in the neighbourhood.

Thus nearly a year slipped away, during which Fanny made five or six more visits to her cousins in Hammersmith ; and then came the seventh expedition on which she started, but from which she never returned. Her letter gave no clue to her whereabouts ; and on inquiry being made in Hammersmith, it transpired that she had been seen there but twice ; so that there were five absences, including the present one, to be accounted for. It is needless to remark that ninety-nine hundredths of the honest folk of Cedarhurst accounted for them in only one way ; they revelled in the stern joy of repeating 'I told you so !' and were chiefly concerned at there being so few people besides Mr. and Mrs. Jackson to whom the phrase would give the requisite mortification. Pretty flighty Fanny had left few friends behind her.

But the minister, and Mary Dene herself, set their faces against the worst interpretation

of the girl's conduct, and advocated the view that she was honestly married, and had been somehow prevented from communicating that important fact to her family. But the charity that aims at robbing a scandal of its sting is resented as an injury by that considerable class of persons who find their chief moral comfort and support in being scandalised. The majority of the inhabitants of Cedarhurst clung with pathetic fervour to the belief that an indelible stain had been inflicted upon the fair fame of the parish ; nay, these capacious souls could easily have found room for as much more of virtuous reprobation as might have been necessitated by a discovery of Fanny's fellow-criminal among their own friends and neighbours. Unfortunately, the recruiting-sergeant was the only conceivable scapegoat, and no ingenuity could show him to have been born in Cedarhurst. But nothing ever is perfect in this world, not even the horrors.

This anonymous letter addressed to Mary Dene contained the first news of Fanny that

had been received since her disappearance a year before. The fact of its being anonymous indicated that the writer's motive, whatever else it might be, must be dishonourable ; and the conventionally proper course for Mary would be to ignore it. And yet was it not her duty to find out whether Fanny were in need of help ? Was it not, indeed, a foregone conclusion that the girl must be in need of every ministration that Christian hands and hearts could afford her ? Here, then, was a dilemma.

‘Why was the letter sent to me rather than to any one else ?’ Mary asked herself. ‘How can it serve my interests to make inquiries about her ?’

On the other hand, could the making of such inquiries do Mary any harm ? It seemed not.

After pondering over the matter for awhile Miss Dene was visited with an idea, which was to submit the difficulty to the Reverend Arthur Strome, and ask his advice upon it. Composed by this determination she

finished her toilet and went down to breakfast.

Aunt Sophia was pacing the room with her arms crossed and an elbow in each hand, and looking down at her pretty feet as one after the other emerged from beneath the hem of her black skirt. At Mary's appearance she underwent a sort of spasm of graceful vivacity, and tripped forward, smiling a good-morning with insinuating unction. The tenderness and devotion uniformly manifested towards her niece by this lady were wonderful to behold, and were not without effect upon its object. Mary had a healthy belief in the reality of her own charms and virtues, and was not obstinately sceptical as to the honesty of her aunt's avowed admiration.

‘How do you feel, Mary, darling?’ inquired Aunt Sophia, taking the young woman's firm soft hand between both her own dry slippery ones. ‘Aren't you looking a little pale? You haven't a headache, surely?’

‘Nonsense, auntie; when did I ever have a headache?’ answered Mary, in her full deep voice.

‘No bad news, then?’

‘What put such a notion into your head?’

Mary demanded, withdrawing her hand rather abruptly. It occurred to her that her aunt might have seen the outside of the anonymous letter, and be on the watch to surprise some information about it. But Aunt Sophia only said: ‘Forgive me, dear, but you know I can’t help being troublesome with those I love;’ and with that they took their seats at the table. Mary opened the previous evening’s *Standard*—a journal which she read regularly and conscientiously; and for a time there was silence, broken only by the tinkle of tea-spoons, and the rustle of the paper, as Mary folded and unfolded it.

‘So I look pale, do I?’ said Mary at last, putting aside the *Standard* and taking up the butter knife. ‘Well, I’m growing old and lazy, and losing my complexion. I don’t take exercise enough. I think I’ll walk over to Cedarhurst this morning and make a call at the Vicarage.’

‘This raw morning! Wouldn’t it be wiser to wait till the afternoon?’

No answer from the heiress, who sometimes allowed herself the luxury of ignoring undesirable questions. But the elder lady returned to the charge.

‘I believe Donald is to go over this forenoon about the new bridle. He might take any message you wanted to send.’

‘Donald might deliver my message—if I had any message; but how could I appoint him deputy to enjoy the vicar’s society for me?’

Aunt Sophia laughed. Laughter was her least graceful manifestation, though she was an adept at smiling; and this may have been one reason why she laughed but seldom. It was, with her, a short-lived and guttural affair, accompanied by a thrusting out of the chin and a pained contraction of the brow.

‘I was only thinking, dear,’ she said, on recovering her gravity, ‘that you might, perhaps, have some commissions for Mr.

Strome about the Christmas presents for the parish children, you know.'

' You had no private reasons, then, for wishing me to stay at home this morning ?'

' Private reasons, Mary dear ! You know, darling, I'm the frankest creature in the world. I always blurt out whatever is on my mind. A hidden motive—if that is what you mean—is something I never was capable of. I often wish I were !'

' Did any letters come this morning ?' Mary asked abruptly.

The normal hue of Aunt Sophia's countenance was proof against variation ; but she half closed her eyes for a moment.

' I think Jane did mention something about a letter—but it wasn't for me. Why do you ask, dear ?'

' Only so as to get the matter off our minds,' replied Mary, with a sarcastic little smile. She leant her cheek on her hand, balanced her spoon on the edge of her cup, and continued : ' The letter was for me, but there was nothing in it—of general interest.'

By-the-way, did you write to your nephew yesterday inviting him here for Christmas Eve?

‘To poor Selim? Yes, indeed! And I am so glad, Mary dear, that he and your Sebastian are to meet under your roof. Both such noble fellows, and both so devoted to you—it seems a shame that old boyish misunderstanding should keep your Sebastian from feeling kindly towards my poor boy. I’m sure it’s not every one would speak of a successful rival as Selim always does of your Sebastian. You will see that they make peace, won’t you?’

‘My Sebastian, as you are pleased to call him, has no petty enmities!’ remarked Mary superbly.

‘And so I say, two such noble fellows should love each other.’

‘Well, I think it depends on Selim.’

‘Oh, where my Selim has loved once, he loves always! It only needs Mr. Strome to hold out his hand, for Selim to take it.’

‘Then he never could have loved me.’

‘Mary darling ! Selim never loved you !

‘Else he would never take his rival’s hand while I lived.’

This was spoken gravely ; and Aunt Sophia, glancing nervously at her niece, was inclined to think that she meant what she said. The good lady was never slow to take a hint, and she mentally noted and corrected several past errors before answering.

‘It may be as you say ; you have more insight than I into human nature ; very likely you understand dear Selim better than I do. Yes ; I suppose there is a point beyond which magnanimity becomes meanness. And you are quite right in feeling that Selim could never pass that point. As for poor little me, you mustn’t notice my chatter ; in these matters I am a mere child compared with you, and I defer to your judgment entirely !

‘Of course I was only in fun,’ said the perverse heiress, after a few moments. ‘There is no reason why they shouldn’t be just as good friends as ever—at least, so far as I am

concerned. Men are not like women—they have other things to think of. Your nephew has behaved with dignity and generosity so far, and probably needs neither you nor me to tell him what he ought to do.'

In regard to this speech Aunt Sophia committed herself no further than by an inarticulate murmur in her throat, and a pensive gaze at the clock on the mantelpiece. Mary presently left the table and moved to the window, where she stood looking out at the broad paths, with their sentinel yew-trees erect and motionless in the pale sunshine, and at the smooth lawn dusted over with last night's frost.

'I think I'll go now,' she said, without turning round.

'I suppose you will meet Mr. Sebastian Strome there?' observed Aunt Sophia.

Mary's hands, which were lightly clasped behind her back, tightened their hold upon each other as the elder lady spoke; but she only answered carelessly:

'Nothing is less likely.'

Aunt Sophia made no rejoinder ; and after waiting a little, Mary added, with a touch of impatience :

‘ How could he be there ? ’

‘ I had a notion the young men were not obliged to be so busy at this season,’ said the other innocently.

Mary turned and faced her aunt. ‘ Sebastian could leave his studies to come and see me at any time he chose,’ she said, haughtily. ‘ But I am not one of those girls who expect their lovers to be always dancing attendance on them. Sebastian and I are betrothed, and that is enough. We don’t need to see each other every day to keep ourselves true ! ’

Aunt Sophia’s faded eyes gleamed for an instant, and the corners of her long mouth twitched, but her voice was as gentle and caressing as ever.

‘ Young people were so much less sensible in my day,’ she remarked. ‘ Your attitude is so much more dignified, Mary darling. But I can remember when my poor old Joshua

and I—— we were together the livelong day, actually ; and Joshua would neglect everything and travel any distance just to kiss my hand, or to hear me call him darling. Heigho ! It was all very foolish, I know ; and I dare say it would have been far better for us, in a worldly point of view, not to have permitted ourselves any passionate feelings. Still, there was a kind of sweetness in it— there was a delicious, foolish sort of triumph in knowing that his love for me was too mighty for his strength ; and it seems to me even now, when I ought to know better, as if I would go through again all the suffering I have since endured for the sake of living over those tender loving days.'

Aunt Sophia broke gracefully down at this point, pressing her handkerchief lightly to her eyes, and catching her breath gently. Mary, with her face in shadow, frowned a little and bit her upper lip.

‘ There ! you won’t laugh at your poor old auntie ?’ resumed this romantic and emotional personage, after a decent interval. ‘ I appre-

ciate how much wiser and better in every respect your way of looking at such things is than mine ; but I can't help being what I am, can I ? I suppose my peculiar nature demanded some tangible expression and, as it were, experience of affection. No ; I'm sure I couldn't have been satisfied, as you are, with the mere abstract assurance. Ah, Mary dear, how much ache and turmoil of heart you will escape ! That refined passionless atmosphere that you breathe renders you independent of our lowlier joys and sorrows. But you mustn't despise us altogether, will you ?'

The petition was, perhaps, gratuitous—possibly, malicious ; at all events, Mary remained silent and undemonstrative. But Aunt Sophia, who seemed to be in an unusually confidential mood, flowed on artlessly.

‘ And that is why—although he is my nephew, and I love him so dearly—that is why I was glad when you gave him up. Selim, you know, is in many ways so like

what my poor Joshua used to be. If you had returned his love, he would never have felt happy out of your sight. He would always have been bothering you with little tokens of his love—you would have been quite out of patience with him. He would write you a note even if he knew he was to meet you two hours later ; he'd have wanted to tell you all his thoughts and plans, and to make his whole life yours, so to say. Poor Selim ! I know him so well. He never could have held himself aloof from you in that grand, lofty way that Sebastian Strome does. He would have thought it the same as saying that he really didn't care for you, or that he cared for some one else more. And, in Selim's case, it would have meant that—I mean he is so different from your Sebastian, you know. So I always anticipated, from the first, that you would tire of Selim—such clinging devotion and self-surrender—poor dear boy ! I used to tell him so, but of course he wouldn't believe me. I only wish I could believe that he would ever recover

the blow—would ever be like his old self again.'

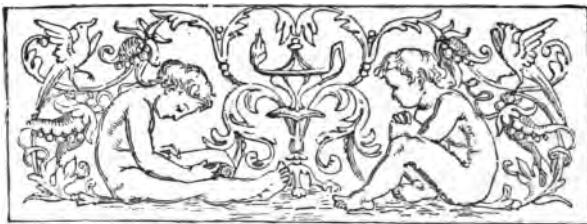
'I thought he was very well resigned,' said Miss Dene coldly.

'I know, you judge by that letter he sent immediately after his rejection; yes, dear Selim has a great deal of pride. But you haven't seen him since then, or heard from him, as I have. Ah, me! well, it's a thing he would not, of course, wish me to speak of. But I wish he had more of that royal indifference that Mr. Sebastian Strome displays. One needs it in this hard world.'

'Why doesn't he get it, then?' Mary demanded, with some sharpness.

Aunt Sophia arose, smiling sweetly. 'It is not so easy to acquire as those who possess it might suppose. Perhaps, if those who have it in superfluity were able to share with those who have none, it might be better for both.' Having despatched this neat little shaft, the good lady gracefully glided from the room, only pausing at the door to ask whether her dear Mary would return home

to lunch, or take that meal at the Vicarage. Miss Dene replied curtly that it would depend upon circumstances; and thus the dialogue—if dialogue it could be called—ended.



CHAPTER VI.

A DOUBT.

HE heiress, on feeling herself alone, pressed her hands against both sides of her face, and drawing them slowly down the cheeks till the fingers interlaced beneath the chin, let them fall thence to the full length of her arms. Why had she been so cross to poor Aunt Sophia? Perhaps Mary would have found it more difficult to answer that question than would Aunt Sophia herself.

She crossed the room slowly, and entered the adjoining conservatory through the broad arched doorway. It was a luxurious lounging-

place on a winter's morning like this, but it was with no purpose of being luxurious that Mary sought it now, save in so far as solitude is sometimes a luxury. The warmth, the fragrance, the fresh green stillness, all those lovely inarticulate influences that could make her happiness happier, were rendered ineffective by her pain. For she was suffering pain—a vague, indignant, anxious pain, whose roots penetrated far inward. When the young woman reached her favourite seat, in a rocky niche overarched by giant plantains, tears burned in her eyes ; but she would not let her face falter, or her lip tremble, in spite of the ache in her throat. ‘What is there for me to cry about?’ was her self-contemptuous question. So she sat proudly beneath the plantains, with her chin upon her palm, and her eyes pregnant of unacknowledged tears. But by-and-by, as memory began its story to her heart, her expression and attitude softened ; she forgot her pride and dignity, and all her present self, and was for a time only the sensitive and feminine creature that

God, apart from civilisation, had made her. Only one human being had ever seen her in this mood, and he but once!

On that autumn evening, not so long ago, when a vision of earthly heaven had suddenly been opened to her, a host of ardent and pure potencies, till then unsuspected, had started into tender life in her heart and brain. For a while they had thriven and rejoiced, and an unending future of happy activity had seemed to await them. But the light that called them forth had gradually waned and darkened; and she, throughout that slow tragedy of change, had tried to believe, first that it did not exist, and then, that it was right it should. Not even to herself, and still less to another, would she admit that her lover was less a lover than he ought to be. Rather than doubt him, she chose to doubt her own ideal of life, and all the beauty and glory in which her maiden faith had trusted. And since she must perforce deem him best and highest, it was incumbent on her to deny, or to condemn as visionary and unpractical,

the standard of goodness and nobility which intuition had revealed to her. For the woman who has pledged her soul for a lump of glass, in the belief that it is a diamond, there seems to be no choice between regarding all glass as diamonds or losing her soul. It is an alternative that leads to cynicism.

It is the glory of first love that everything connected with it seems unprecedented and peculiar: such chances, such mysteries, have never been known in love's annals before. So Mary had marvelled, in the secret retirements of her soul, at the strange blindness that had kept her from knowing that she loved Sebastian until the moment when he had first spoken to her of love. Not till then had she realised, with a thrill of hot surprise, that he had ruled her heart even from childhood. How well she remembered every word and look of that great interview; and, still more, the thoughts that could not be spoken, and the emotions that could not be revealed! And at what a critical juncture he had come—the true prince: just when

she was miserably trying to persuade herself that no such thing as a true prince existed, and that she might as well yield herself to the very commonplace, but apparently devoted and honest mortal, the sound of whose piteous pleading was still in her ears. What a peril to have escaped so narrowly!

What had Sebastian said to her? Not much; and yet how infinitely more than voluble Selim could have uttered in a twelve-month. It was all strong and to the purpose; at once masterful and tender. These were the words that her unconscious life had waited to hear; they interpreted its meaning to the past, and forecast the future. They made her precious to herself in the assurance that she was dear to him. They gave her a place and a motive in the world, who had before been homeless and objectless. And when the consecrating kiss had been given and he was gone, then, in her solitude, had she first perceived how intimately he was near her. He had passed out of her bodily sight, but into her spiritual being, there to

dwell for ever. She could not lose him unless she first lost herself; she could not lose herself except to find herself in him.

So had it seemed then; yet there had been a disappointment somewhere, which every passing day had rendered more undeniable. Who was to blame for it?

Mary Dene had hitherto shrunk, even from a discussion with herself of this question, as from a kind of disloyalty. Afterwards she decided that whatever fault there was must be on her side. She had anticipated something more than the world had to offer. Sebastian was the highest type of lover possible, and it showed either ignorance or ingratitude in her to be dissatisfied. She therefore framed any number of self-satirising rebukes and arguments to convince herself that being neglected was far more proper and comfortable than to be overwhelmed with loving observances; and that the passionate affection, with which her very heart sometimes ached, was much better veiled under an aspect of coldness and reserve

than allowed any natural outlet. She had read a different account of love in poetry and romance; but poetry and romance were graceful misrepresentations.

These pathetic sophistries in so far failed to dominate the girl's righteous instincts that she took pains to keep them and the cause of them to herself. She would have given the world for a confidant and a counsellor; but she would not sacrifice a jot of her maidenly pride for all the counsellors and confidants in the world. And again, it hurt her pride to feel that she was concealing anything; and the only way out of this dilemma was to conceal from herself that concealment. A naturally sincere soul manages such refinements painfully; and Mary pulled to pieces her mental serenity and self-respect, in order to get materials for the construction of her factitious happiness.

Now when Aunt Sophia, in her artless and impulsive way, took to describing the ardour and chivalries of her own love affair, she touched her niece in a tender spot; for

certainly Sebastian had never displayed the frenzy of devotion that Joshua was credited with ; and Mary's chief sustaining hope all along had been that all report of such frenzy was mere caricature, and never by any means matter of actual fact. But if what Aunt Sophia said were true, or anything like the truth, how should Sebastian be vindicated ? Not that a Joshua or a Selim, or twenty thousand times both of them, could have realised to her that vision which rose before her as she leant upon the old sun-dial in the starlit garden. No ; but if a trumpery Joshua or Selim could so devote themselves, then she knew a man whose ardour ought to be to their's as is the sun to a candle. What was the logical issue of this deduction ?

Mary raised her pale face, and the hands that lay in her lap clasped each other so tightly that the amethyst of her engagement-ring bit the flesh. Her lips were dry, and her eyes strained and bright.

‘ My love, shall I insult you with a doubt ? ’ she whispered. She moved her hands and

arms apart with a slight but powerful gesture.
'The devil tempted me! I know you love
me better than I love you.'

She arose after this, and walked up and down the fern-shadowed pathway that extended the length of the conservatory. She felt tremulous and tired, yet restless. At last she thought, with relief, of her intended expedition to Cedarhurst. How long had she been sitting here? It was already late, perhaps. Before going in she cast a glance towards the park through the glass door that gave in that direction. A slender black figure was advancing swiftly along the path, with his face bent towards the ground, and a stout walking-stick swinging in his hand. It was the Reverend Arthur Strome himself, appearing as if in answer to her thought.



CHAPTER VII.

A FRIEND.

ROR a man who enjoyed open-air walking so much, the minister seemed, now as always, singularly heedless of nature's aspects. To look at him, hurrying with downward brow through lovely landscapes, you would have said that he knew them not. And yet when, on meeting you, he threw up his kind and trenchant countenance, you could not but perceive that the beauty of the world was lost upon him less than upon the trained eye of many a painter. He knew the charms and changes of the months ; and unobtrusive treasures of detail

escaped him as little as did the broader-smiling graces. Perhaps he was planning his sermon the while ; but he could consult the sweet wisdom of the woods and fields to make his argument sounder, or brighten his illustrations with the light of the seasons. Nevertheless, he uniformly walked with his eyes cast down. Whence, then, this minute and comprehensive vision ? Was the whole man ocular, absorbent, at all points of beauty, as the earth of rain and sunshine ? At least, he confirmed the paradox that Nature never discovers her choicest secrets to him who stares her rudely in the face.

When he had approached within two or three rods of the house, Mary saw him look up and turn off to the right, with the intention of passing round the corner to the eastern side. At another time she might have preferred to accord him the full compliment of a ceremonious reception by way of the main entrance and front drawing-room ; but to-day she wanted to have him quite to herself, at least for the first half-hour ; so she quickly

opened the glass-door of the conservatory and called to him.

‘Mr. Strome! Mr. Strome! Please, I am here!’

He faced about at once, and beheld her standing half in, half out of the doorway, like a full-blossomed, sumptuous vine; smiling and rosy with a noble shyness; one hand twisting at the door-handle, her head inclined with a childlike pose over the other shoulder, so that it rested against the door-frame; and her auburn hair, with its bright, crinkled roughness, relieved against the warm gloom of the conservatory behind her.

‘Good-morning, Mary,’ said the minister, coming up and taking her hand. He had the faculty of putting a quite extraordinary amount of cordiality into the most ordinary phrases and actions. ‘How well your hair looks! I once saw, in an excavation near Rome, a fresco of a Roman patrician maiden, which was like you. Or perhaps you were the artist’s model? You look immortal.’

‘I don’t want to be immortal,’ said Mary,

her smile of welcome dying away. 'Come inside and sit under the plantains. What made you think of coming? Did you feel that I was wanting to see you, and would have set out for Cedarhurst myself in another minute? I'm so glad.'

'This is good!' said the minister, seating himself with a long breath of content. 'Sebastian would envy me, if he saw me now.'

He held Mary's hand as he spoke, and now raised it with ingenuous homage to his lips. Mary was secretly a little jealous of the sweet and simple way in which her lover's father made love to her. It contrasted too favourably with Sebastian's own behaviour: moreover, the father inspired confidence, whereas the son excited, too often, a somewhat feverish suspense and questioning.

'By-the-way,' continued the minister, 'we had a note from him this morning. We shall all meet here Friday evening, then.'

'I hope so,' said Mary, in a low tone.

'My dear Mary—dear daughter!' ex-

claimed the minister, with one of his sudden, energetic outbursts ; ‘you can’t think how pleased it makes me to think how happy you and Sebastian are in each other ! When I was a young fellow, I used to think that no two people ever had been or could be so happy as my wife and I were : but now I admit you two to be our peers ; for my boy is a better man than I ever was, and——No !’ he broke off with a laugh, ‘I can’t say you are better than my wife—that couldn’t be ; but you are his chosen woman out of the world, and I would have chosen you out of the world for him !’

Mary turned her face and full hazel eyes slowly round upon the speaker.

‘How long ago were you married ?’ she asked after a moment.

‘I don’t know. It doesn’t seem long—that is, time doesn’t seem to have anything to do with it. Come to think of it, though, I suppose it must be—it can’t be !—yes, it is really more than thirty years !’ And the minister gave a ‘Humph !’ of musing ad-

miration at his own discovery. 'I must tell Sue that!' he added half-aloud.

'But do you remember anything—how you felt, and what you did, and all that—do you remember after so long?' pursued Mary curiously.

Arthur Strome laughed his boyish laugh again. It was not quite a boy's laugh, however; it was as spontaneous as that, but more thoughtful, if thoughtfulness be predictable of laughter.

'I fancy we don't remember such things,' he said, resting his chin on his breast and speaking meditatively. 'There's no need to remember them; they are always there, fresh every morning and evening. We can't be said to remember violets and roses, though winter parts us from them every year, for we have never forgotten them; and still less are we likely to forget the immortal flowers of paradise, over which no earthly winter has power. The fact is, you see, Mary,' continued the minister, looking pleasantly upon her, 'the fact is, that my wife and I are still

at the beginning only of our love affair, and have had no time as yet to bring our memories into play. Memories were made for old people.'

'Then I must be old,' said Mary, letting her hands fall in her lap. 'And Sebastian, too,' she added, after a pause; 'he has memories—I shall never know of what.'

'You have hardly begun yet, I suppose,' rejoined the minister, reaching forward to pluck a sprig of heliotrope, and smelling it while he spoke. 'You are barely out of the chrysalid. Once get into the tide of life, and you'll find yourselves as young as my wife and I are. When I first met her I was a mooning hobbledehoy of an overgrown young wiseacre, who fancied I had yearnings after the infinite, and moral and political panaceas, and a wasted past and an ambiguous future—altogether very badly off. But when I saw her, it was like a new birth to me. I was filled with a life of my own: no longer a life at second-hand, made up from the poets and metaphysicians that I had read. I had been

very idle before, though always fancying I was much occupied. It was just the other way now—no one was ever so busy, and yet my soul ached to be busier. But really I did a good deal. When I woke up in the morning (after dreaming feverishly of her all night) I had to plead on both sides of a hundred arguments as to whether or not I might venture, without injuring my cause, to call upon her on that day. When it was decided over every appeal that I should go, then the question would arise, what mood or what temper would it be proper for me to assume on entering her presence? By the time that was settled I was dressed and at breakfast. But I couldn't eat much breakfast in those days, the suspense spoilt my appetite. On the way from my house to hers I would fight with a dozen Apollyons and Giant Despairs, who tried to destroy me with the idea that I was dull and bored her, or that I had a rival. But all that was nothing to the way I was inwardly hurried to and fro when at last I was face to face with her. I had to watch

every movement she made, and every chance expression that passed through her eyes, and devise a thousand conflicting interpretations of them in a minute ; and then I was obliged to forecast what she would say or do next, and, when it turned out something different, to explain to myself the reason why. It was necessary that I should be perfectly in sympathy with her ; not only with her words and actions, but also with what lay at the bottom of her heart, which was generally quite the contrary. And though in the bottom of my own heart I knew intuitively what was in the bottom of hers, I must needs make her and myself wretched by pretending that I did not, and that I understood her to mean what she appeared to mean. Oh, how miserable we were, and how divinely happy ! But all this was before we had formally confessed our love for each other.'

‘After that, I suppose, things went on more quietly ?’ said Mary, interlacing the ends of her fingers in her lap, and turning her face a little away from her companion.

‘Oh, it was much worse than ever after that ! It’s wonderful what tremendous spiritual vicissitudes a lover—a pair of lovers, that is—can endure once or twice an hour, for days together, and yet survive. They love each other so, I suppose they would die of tenderness if they didn’t constantly vary the strain by pretending to be offended or indifferent. But, ah me ! the terrible part of it is, that no amount of experience can convince you that this last quarrel won’t be the real and final one ; and then you have such an exquisite access of agony at the thought, not of your desolation, but of hers—that is, I mean, supposing you were the man, which luckily you are not.’

‘Why should you say “luckily”?’

‘Because, Mary, after all, you are surer of your lover than he can be of you. You are an angel in his eyes, whom he can never be quite worthy to win ; if he were to lose you, he would feel that he had no right to complain. He knows himself unworthy to kiss the hem of your garment ; and when, instead, you let

him touch your cheek or your lips, he is afraid of his bliss, and thinks it can't be real, and can't last. Sometimes, when he is alone, he throws himself down and weeps like a child to think how gracious and glorious you are.'

The minister stopped suddenly. He had been talking rapidly and ardently, looking straight before him, and perhaps forgetting, for the moment, that he had a listener. Mary was sitting turned partly away from him, her averted cheek resting on one hand. The other hand she had suddenly put out and laid on the minister's arm in the midst of his speech. Unawares, he had been doing over again, with severer effect, Aunt Sophia's work of an hour previous ; and Mary had felt that she could endure to hear no more. The minister at once knew, less by the testimony of his senses than by the instinct of sympathy that was in him, that she was fighting with some poignant emotion ; he was startled and perplexed, and fearing to make matters worse by groping efforts to

put right an unknown wrong, he could only remain silent, his heart meanwhile overflowing with so much compassion and kindness, that it was a wonder if Mary were not directly conscious thereof.

‘Forgive me!’ she said at last, facing him with flushed cheeks. ‘I have been out of sorts all the morning. It was partly for that I was coming to see you.’

‘There, there, let us forgive each other then!’ interposed the minister, with all the cheeriness of tone that he could muster. ‘I said more than I ought to have said—’

‘Is it all true?’ burst out the young woman, with all the depth of her voice. ‘It need not be always true—people are so different!’ She was breaking through her self-control, drawing in deep breaths that shook her bosom. ‘I mean that if—any two people never had any of those lover’s quarrels, as they are called—it wouldn’t show that they—did not truly love each other? No, of course; I understand what you meant, you—you needn’t tell me—

I am happy—perfectly happy—oh, oh, don't look at me ! let me be !

She pressed her forehead against the back of the rustic bench, and gave way to passionate sobs and tears. Mr. Strome softly arose, and moved away down the little path to the other end of the conservatory. 'What is troubling her ? what can there be to make her unhappy ?' were the questions he asked himself again and again. The fragrant blossoms of the flowers seemed to smile upon his perplexity. He rested his fingers against the glass, and gazed out over the keen-aired landscape. How wholesome and peaceful the earth looked, even in frost ! How briskly that distant figure stepped along beneath the leafless trees, on his way towards the house ! There was, by-the-way, something vaguely familiar in his gait and aspect, but the minister's thoughts were too much preoccupied to admit of his immediately recognising him. Presently the figure was lost to sight behind a clump of shrubbery. 'It was Fawley !' suddenly said the

minister to himself. Then, by an association of ideas, such as often makes that seem plausible which is in reality unlikely, he made Fawley accountable in some way for Mary's distress. 'She had allowed him to have hopes, perhaps ; now she blames herself, and fancies, probably, that Sebastian may end by doing so too. Yes, that must be it ; I'm glad it's nothing serious. But Fawley must be coming here ; and I have not said a word yet about Fanny !'



CHAPTER VIII.

A LOVER.

Etched, and walked slowly back through the leaves and flowers to the embowered seat. Mary had stopped crying, and was sitting with downcast looks and listless hands, but apparently quite calm. The traces of her emotion had no power to mar her beauty. Whether sleeping, laughing, weeping, glad, or angry, Mary Dene's countenance always retained its superb balance of lines and proportions. A sculptor, with an eye thoroughly trained to the height of the old classic standard, would have valued Mary's head even more than the

painter who saw the ideal of Titian in her complexion and hair. Perfect form is far rarer, and also far more powerful, than perfect colour.

‘I am very much ashamed of myself,’ said Mary, lifting her eyelashes for a moment as her friend approached. ‘I have felt one of my wicked fits coming on for some time past. I am only sorry it should have happened while you were here. I shall be very good now for days and days. You haven’t told me whether there was anything particular—I mean, whether you couldn’t suggest something about our Christmas-tree, or the arrangements for the parish children. Is there nothing I can do?’

‘There will be nothing wanting to the complete happiness of everybody,’ returned Mr. Strome, seating himself beside her again. ‘You have not lived long in the world, Mary, but you have increased the joy of many people. For one thing, you have helped to make my life a happier one than most men’s, by promising to make its happiness hereditary.’

‘I don’t know—I hope I may,’ she said, looking away abstractedly.

‘It’s delightful to think how much good you and Sebastian will be able to do,’ the minister resumed. ‘I have had many schemes, but I could not carry them out. I hadn’t the means; nor, probably, the capacity—only the will. You and Sebastian will have all three.’

‘I may be able to do something with the Home—I hope so,’ said Mary. She spoke almost apathetically. The fire of her spirit had sunk back after its outburst, and would no longer respond to ordinary stimulants. The intellectual side of her nature might be interested, but there was to be no more emotion at present.

‘You have no inmates for the Home as yet?’

‘No; none as yet.’

‘I have one to propose to you,’ said the minister, bending forwards and looking on the ground, his hands on his knees.

The slight but perceptible alteration in his

voice, indicating that he had entered a new region of feeling, caused Mary to rouse herself somewhat, and turn towards him. Her expression was as if emerging from a cloud. She was gathering up the echoes of what had been lately spoken, and trying to order them by a single swift effort of the mind.

‘An inmate of the Home?’ she said, after a moment; and then, reading shrewdly in the other’s face, and hazarding the guess from a trust in coincidence, she added, before he could reply: ‘You mean Fanny! ’

‘She has written to you also, then?’

‘No. Is her address No. 97, Falkirk Road?’

The minister pulled his letter out of his pocket and consulted it. ‘Yes; you are right,’ he said. ‘Have you known it long?’

Miss Dene smiled a little at the surprise in his face. She shook her head. ‘Not very long. Does she mention having seen any one?’

‘I happen to know that her mother heard of her last night from that young fellow Prout,

who used to be in service at Lady Featherstone's. He caught sight of her at the corner of a street, as he was passing in an omnibus.'

'Prout? Where is he now?

'He has a situation in London, I believe; but comes up here once in a while to see his friends. He used to be very fond of poor Fanny—before she left us.'

'He followed her home, I suppose, or at least found out where she lived?

'She disappeared before he could alight. That is his story. It's of no consequence, since we have her address from herself. Will you read her letter?

Mary took it in one hand, and perused it critically, but not very sympathetically.

'This ends the doubt,' she remarked. 'The uncharitable people were, after all, in the right.'

'They are always in the wrong, nevertheless,' replied the minister, with a sigh.

Miss Dene rested her elbows on her knees and her face between her hands, and in this

position appeared to cogitate gravely for several moments. By-and-by she sat erect, and taking from her pocket a folded paper, she held it out to Mr. Strome, with the words : 'I got that this morning.'

The minister's brows drew together as he glanced through the writing.

'This is anonymous!' he exclaimed.
'Have you any clue?'

'No ; but since you have the news independently of this, it's no matter ; I can ignore it now, and act independently. It couldn't have been Prout—he wouldn't both have written anonymously to me, and spoken personally to Mrs. Jackson. But I don't care now. It's no matter.'

Mr. Strome read the communication again. 'It would seem by this as if your inquiry into Fanny's situation were to result in the discovery of some fact which the writer knows, but fears to put his name to—something libellous, consequently. But libellous against whom, unless against the scoundrel who led the poor child astray ! But how

could knowing about him concern you ?
That's curious !

'We shall soon find out, probably,' Miss Dene said with indifference.

'That brings me to my business,' rejoined the minister, returning the letter, which the young lady thrust carelessly back into her pocket. 'Fanny, you see, is evidently shy about coming back here—as well she may be, poor girl—and only wants to provide a resource in the worst contingency: her own death and the survival of the little one. Now there is no special likelihood of her dying; but, on the other hand, it would be tempting Providence for us to let her pass through her trial among strangers. She must be brought here; some one whom she respects and will obey must go and fetch her.'

'You mean me, I suppose,' said Miss Dene composedly. 'Yes; I can do it. Fanny will obey me.'

'This is a man's work, my dear daughter,' the minister answered, grasping his knees nervously. 'I wanted to go myself, only I

thought of some one else. I thought of Sebastian.'

Miss Dene emerged from her lassitude at once. She looked at her companion with knit brows and parted lips.

'Sebastian — Sebastian Strome?' She paused a little, and then began to laugh, not constrainedly, but as if really amused. 'Do you really mean to make Sebastian do a thing like that? I'm afraid he won't thank you—he won't like it.'

The minister warmed a little at this.

'His business is to do such things as a servant of God, not for his own pleasure. I don't want him to like it.'

'But different people are fitted for different duties. Sebastian, somehow, seems intended to help only rich and cultivated people to be good. I don't mean exactly that,' added Miss Dene, still smiling; 'indeed, I don't know that I ever thought about the matter before; but I am sure he would be quite out of his element with Fanny. He wouldn't really know what to do or say, and vulgarity

and ignorance displease him intensely. It's constitutional, I suppose ; he isn't to blame for it, is he ?

' He would be to blame only if he gave way to it ; and that I should be sorry to believe him capable of,' said the minister, lifting his hands a little from his knees. ' No ; you hardly do him justice there, Mary. I admit his fastidiousness, but he has the virtue to overcome it. Elegance of life, cultivation, light—those things are his snare ; but if he is to lead souls to heaven, or even bring his own there, he must work amidst those very classes of the people whom he would naturally most avoid. I've spoken to him of this more than once, and I think he feels I'm right. And the reason he's glad of your wealth and position, Mary, is not because it will bring him into closer relations with the society he most enjoys, but because it will give him the means of succouring those whose material condition might most repel him. Sebastian is too true a man to think of money.'

‘Oh, Mr. Strome,’ interposed Mary, bending forward, and touching his restless hands lightly with one of her own, ‘surely you aren’t going to deny that Sebastian means to marry me for the sake of dissipating my income in selfish extravagance?’

At this sally they both laughed, and the little cloud that had threatened to rise between them dissolved away. ‘I will leave Sebastian himself to convince you of that,’ he said; ‘meanwhile, what do you decide? Shall he go for Fanny? After all, he will probably enter into the matter with more heartiness than you suppose. He was always interested in Fanny, you remember; and I believe has done her several little kindnesses at various times.’

‘Oh, has he? I don’t recollect his ever having mentioned it to me.’

At this juncture an interruption occurred which the minister might have foreseen, but which, at all events, took Miss Dene by surprise. The voice of Aunt Sophia was audible, approaching through the adjoining

breakfast-room, calling in persuasive intonations : 'Mary ! Mary, darling ! Where is my Mary hidden away ?' And finally the intonations entered the conservatory, with a man's step sounding behind them. 'Ah, there she is !' cried Aunt Sophia joyously ; 'and if there isn't dear Mr. Strome with her ! Selim, love, you are fortunate. See, Mary, the old friend I have brought you.'

Selim Fawley came forward, looking handsome, gentlemanly, and deferential, and not obtrusively Judaic. This young man possessed a remarkable faculty for expressing by gestures, glances, and a general carriage of the body his profound respect and admiration for ladies. When he spoke the effect of the dumb play was, perhaps, a little marred ; for though his society voice was hushed and gently modulated, and his phrases those of a man of education and refinement, still there was something in the play of his red lips while talking, and a Semitic humidity in his small brown eyes when smiling, and yet more when laughing, which tended to counter-

balance his many solid attractions in the judgment of certain ultra-fastidious Christian critics. But he was generally admitted to be an honest, straightforward, well-meaning, and good-hearted fellow ; and his friends maintained that underneath his modest and unassuming exterior he concealed a mind and talents of a high order ; and it was beyond cavil that he had taken high honours at the university, and might, but for an unfortunate illness, have taken the very highest.

Such as he was, therefore, Mr. Selim Fawley came forward, and prostrated himself, figuratively, at the feet of the heiress of Dene. He said he found himself passing through the neighbourhood, and that almost without his conscious volition his steps had led him to the Hall. It was to him a delightful impromptu ; but he was regretfully aware that the earliness of the hour rendered his intrusion even more unwarrantable than— However, he must proceed on his way immediately, and he would trust that the brevity of

his stay would in some measure be accepted as compensation for his unceremonious appearance.

Miss Dene, who had given less heed to the purport of this speech than to the physical processes and embroideries whereby it was accompanied, smilingly said that she was very glad to see him again, and that he must remain to lunch, which he promptly and earnestly protested with many thanks was unfortunately impossible ; well, then, she supposed she must make the most of him while he did stay. How had he been, where had he been, and what had he been doing since—for the last few months ? Enjoying himself in London, or on the Continent ? No ? She would have done so in his place ; men have so many more opportunities than women in this civilised world.

With such lofty converse did these two persons regale each other, sauntering side by side up and down the conservatory paths, following a yard or two behind the Reverend Mr. Strome and Aunt Sophia. It was a

curious phenomenon, but Mary Dene, when in Selim's company, was always impelled, as now, by who knows what perverse and mischievous spirit, to chatter to him in the above-indicated vein of reckless and almost coquettish banter, and to treat him with a certain sort of freedom which she never dreamt of adopting towards any other person of her acquaintance. It was the result, perhaps, of the species of good-humoured and confiding contempt which she could not help feeling for the young man, combined with a certain half-resentful amusement at the notion of his undertaking to be seriously in love with her. Finding it difficult or impracticable to get entertainment out of him in any other way, she had, we may suppose, instinctively resorted to the device of playing her wit upon him, and experimenting on the extent of his submissiveness. It was not creditable to Miss Dene, this behaviour, but it seemed to be inevitable ; it had beguiled poor Selim into the rashness of a declaration, but it had never pretended to be anything more serious than it was. On

this their first meeting since his last autumn's discomfiture, Miss Dene found it most natural or most convenient to fall at once into the old vein ; and Selim acquiesced pliantly if not delightedly. He also attempted once or twice to draw the heiress a little out of ear-shot of the other couple ; but these efforts she quietly but effectively opposed. In process of time it became necessary for him to say that now he must be going. The four were at this juncture standing together in the breakfast-room.

‘Ah ! and, by-the-way, Mr. Strome,’ continued Selim, casting a respectful look in the minister’s direction, ‘I heard a piece of news yesterday which will interest you, though it is very sad news, I grieve to say. It is about that unfortunate young creature—I mean Fanny Jackson—she has been seen in London. Oh, I see you know—you have heard it already. I beg pardon.’

‘It certainly seems to be no secret,’ observed Mary, smiling. ‘Where did you hear it, Mr. Fawley ?’

'I have a servant, a sort of valet, or factotum, Prout——'

'Oh, Prout is your man, is he?' broke in the minister. 'He brought the first intelligence to Cedarhurst. Mary and I have just been discussing the matter.'

'Ah, yes. Can I be of any use? I am on my way to London; and if I could do anything in the way of looking the poor creature up, you know, or taking her any message, I should be most happy.'

'Thank you. That's very kind of you, Fawley——' began the minister, hesitating and looking at Miss Dene.

'We've already arranged about that. Sebastian—Mr. Strome is to go to her, and fetch her down here,' she said at once, answering the glance.

'Sebastian? Oh, indeed,' said Fawley, and stopped suddenly with a side-look towards Aunt Sophia.

As for the latter, she gave quite a start, and exclaimed: 'My darling Mary! You're not in earnest, surely?'

‘Miss Dene knows best what is proper,’ Fawley now said, with a low obeisance. ‘What she desires must be right’

‘I’m very glad, Mary, that you agree with me,’ said the minister, his visage lighting up with interior pleasure.

‘Yes, I dare say it will turn out all well,’ came dubiously from Aunt Sophia.

‘It seems to me a very simple matter,’ Miss Dene rejoined rather haughtily. ‘I hardly expected it would create such a sensation !’

A short, but slightly embarrassed pause ensued, to be broken by Fawley’s making a fresh and this time effective motion towards departure. Miss Dene gave him her hand very frankly, and bade him not fail to be present on the coming Friday.

‘I shall not live till then,’ he answered effusively ; and saluting Mr. Strome, and dutifully kissing his affectionate aunt’s cheek, he bowed himself out of the room.

‘The heedless fellow !’ cried Aunt Sophia, as soon as the door had closed ; ‘he’s gone

and left his cane behind him.' And the good-natured creature caught it up and tripped after him.

She overtook him in the passage. Their eyes met and exchanged a sort of smile.

'*Pas si mal!*' said the lady.

'It certainly has turned out well, considering how near that idiot Prout came to spoiling everything,' rejoined the gentleman.
'The thing will almost work itself now.'

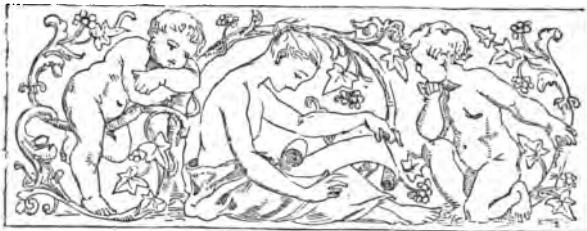
'There, off with you--and we'll keep each other informed,' added the lady; and off he went.

Meanwhile, in the breakfast-room, the minister was also taking his leave, and saying: 'Shall I write to him about it, then?'

'*Ye-es*,' replied Mary musingly; 'or, no,' she went on, lifting her head with the air of taking a decision; 'if you don't mind, I'll write to him myself.'

'Good! that will do,' he answered heartily. He took her hand, and stood for a moment holding it and looking at her. 'Good-bye,

dear daughter,' he said. 'I shall see you again on Friday, or before, God willing ; but any parting in this world may be the last. God bless you ! you've made me very happy.' Mary leaned forward, and he kissed her forehead ; then she saw him pass out through the conservatory, and so vanish from her sight.



CHAPTER IX.

A STUDENT OF DIVINITY.



HE sunshine of that same twenty-second of December (the forenoon of which has been already passed by the reader in the vicinity of Cedarhurst and Dene Hall) made but a poor show in London. If it was pallid in the country, in the city it acquired a dull brownish tint; insomuch that its broadest illumination was scarcely as dusky as a deep shadow would be in lands less solicitously veiled from the eye of Phœbus. It persevered, however, with praiseworthy self-sacrifice, in forcing its ineffective way into the gloomy

heart of many an unholy court and alley, rendering the squalor and uncleanness a little more conspicuous, and thereby reminding the inhabitants, not in the most complimentary manner, that there was a heaven above even them. It also laid itself against the swarthy faces of buildings in the more aristocratic quarters of the town ; and brooded grimly over the blighted expanses of dingy turf in the parks. Its sombre traces were visible along Regent Street and the Strand, and even on the upper stories of those narrow little streets which extend thence towards the river. From the windows of a lodging situated at the bottom of one of these lanes, it might be seen casting a dusky gleam upon the buttresses of a great shapeless bridge, across which smoky trains rumbled to and fro, and glinting dully athwart the muddy waves of the Thames, enlivened by the ponderous oarage of slow barges and the fussy palpitation of steamboats. From these windows, also, the transcendent orb of day himself might sometimes be detected by a

keen pair of eyes, travelling through space incognito, in the likeness of the crown of an ancient straw hat. The disguise was perfect.

Although the lodging we speak of was within half a minute's walk of the populous Strand, the noise of the traffic hardly penetrated to it. The quiet, however, was altogether a different thing from the quiet of the country: a sort of shadow of the everlasting hubbub still reached the ear, so that, had you been conveyed hither blindfold, you would have known (without being able to explain how) that you were in the midst of some great centre of human turmoil. The rooms themselves, on the second floor, were comfortably and even handsomely furnished. The sitting-room, which opened into the bedroom, had pale reddish-brown walls, and curtains and upholstery of olive-green stamped velvet; the long low bookcase and the study table were of oak; and above the mantelpiece was an oblong panelled looking-glass, with bevelled edges, mounted in a flat velvet-

covered frame. It was evidently a room inhabited by a man ; but it would not have been easy, from the testimony of its still life, to infer the man's age, character, or pursuits. There were to be seen few or none of the fanciful and bizarre knicknacks which commonly ornament the shelves and tables of young gentlemen of fashion. Here were no cartes of pretty actresses ; nor were the walls enriched by studies of hunting-scenes in burnt-sienna, sap-green, and vermillion. There were no French mannikins in terra-cotta, no grotesque Japanese monsters, no boxing-gloves, and no tobacco-pipes. But upon the bookcase stood an excellent model in bronze of the Venus of Milo ; and round the room were hung, in plain frames, a proof engraving by Bettelini of Carracci's Jupiter and Juno ; an original pen-drawing, by Correggio, of an angel writing ; an etching of Michael Angelo's Temptation and Fall ; and a tiny landscape study in water-colours by Turner. On the mantelpiece, at either side of the looking-glass, stood two tall tankards of

ivory, carved with figures in high relief ; and between them, in the centre, ticked an entirely modern and able-bodied clock, all gold and plate-glass, and with a countenance expressive of the time in four different quarters of the world. This clock, somehow, produced a refined and not offensive impression of cynicism. Against the corner of the book-case leaned three or four walking-sticks, whose most obvious peculiarity was their extraordinary thickness and heaviness. The book-case contained a large number of eighteenth century memoirs, French, German, and English ; Heine's *Reise Bilder* ; the novels of Fielding and of Jane Austen ; the sonnets of Michael Angelo and Dante's *Vita Nuova*, bound together in one volume ; the Bible, and Webster's *Dictionary*, in similar bindings ; the works of Horace, Ovid, and Catullus ; and on the lower shelf a great many volumes chiefly by Jesuit writers, the titles of which would be unfamiliar to most English ears. Next the book-case stood a small rosewood harmonium ; and, to make an

end of this catalogue, in front of one of the windows was placed a sort of stand, holding a block of seasoned sandal-wood, in process of being translated into a richly carven casket. A collection of tools lay together on a lower shelf of the stand, and round about were scattered aromatic chips and saw-dust.

A heavy green velvet portière hung in the doorway between this room and the bed-chamber, which contained little beyond the ordinary appurtenances of cleanliness, repose, and comfort. The owner of the apartment stood before the dressing-table, gravely and vigorously brushing his light-brown curly hair, with a couple of ivory-backed brushes. A majolica flower-pot containing a single yellow narcissus, occupied the window-sill on his right.

The face reflected in the toilet-glass was young in years—under thirty—but mature in expression. The remarkable unevenness of its modelling gave the features, even when at rest, a singularly vivid stamp of life: in what

was really stable there appeared to be (by a sort of optical illusion) a continual flux and change. It might almost be said that, from the two sides of this visage, two distinct and yet interwoven characters looked simultaneously forth, producing upon the beholder an impression at once single and complex.

The eyebrows, several degrees darker than the hair, nearly met across the face, and the left eye looked almost black in comparison with the right one. The latter, moreover, had a slight cast in it, thereby enhancing in no small measure that peculiar duality of aspect already alluded to. The whole lower part of the face on the right side was less full and rounded than on the left ; even the lips had a shorter curve on that side, imparting a flavour of irony to the mouth. The nose was nearly straight ; the short chin curved outward boldly, and had all the sharpness of contour of a cutting on an antique gem. The head was hollowed at the temples, and expanded nobly above ; the air growing thin on the region of the crown, but curling close

and thick at the sides. Upon the left cheek-bone, just beneath the hollow of the eye, was a conspicuous black mole.

Such a face, dispassionately considered, would hardly be deemed beautiful ; and if it had belonged to a woman, there would probably have been found no one to dispute its ugliness. As it was, some people maintained it to be handsome. Many women, after being repelled by it at first, discovered in it on further acquaintance an indescribable fascination. Men were variously affected towards it, according as they liked or disliked what is intelligent, witty, bold, sarcastic, and inscrutable. Upon the whole, it made more enemies than friends, and more unavowed enemies than open ones. It was a face which sooner or later compelled you to take sides, so to speak ; the only impossible attitude with regard to it being that of indifference.

There was something in the way this gentlemen plied his hair-brushes, in the pose of his well-knit figure before the dressing-

table, and in the air with which, having brushed his hair to his satisfaction, he struck the brushes together and put them down, that indicated self-possession and power. He now took from its peg, and slowly put on, a voluminous wadded dressing-gown, which had seen its best days so far as appearance went, but which was none the less comfortable on that account. Wrapping this round him, and securing it at the waist by the tasselled cords, he pushed aside the portière and entered the sitting-room. The table was set for breakfast ; but the covered dish of eggs and bacon, the pot of coffee, and the rack of toast, were disposed about the hearth, subject to the beneficent glow of the coals in the grate. Three or four letters in blue envelopes lay beside the plate on the table. The gentleman took them up, glanced at the superscription, and laid them down again.

‘Mrs. Blister means well, but she lacks discrimination,’ he said to himself, as he transferred the eatables from the hearth to the table, and took his seat in the chair.

'A more capacious soul would have put the bills in the fire, and left the breakfast to take care of itself. These eggs have lost their succulence. Quarter to twelve, though! —serve me right. Is the world in general, I wonder, served right as seldom as I am?' Well, at all events, last night puts me five hundred to the good. These be not fruits meet for repentance. Evidently I am a child of wrath, abandoned to my fate, else I shouldn't be so deliberately lucky. St. Augustine says that Providence made the taste of his worldly pleasures bitter in his mouth, to the end that he might seek pleasures without alloy. But where is the bitterness of five hundred pounds? Ha! I will ask Culver this evening. There are hopes for Culver. Tum, tum-tum, tum tilly-tum-tum ti! Mrs. Blister, that coffee was not up to your usual high coffee-mark. I shall console myself with a cigarette. The corner-stone of true dissipation is temperance. What does a man who smokes every day know of the joys of tobacco! How can a

creature who pays his bills every week appreciate—but come, let us see what they are! Bill for the clock, “as before rendered.” Well, the clock shall be paid for; it has stood by me well; I should often have been floundering in mere eternity but for the clock. Oh, livery-stable has heavy payments to make, has he! He shall wait; acute cases of distress always harden my heart. Why, here’s something that actually is not a bill! Oh, oh! an anonymous letter, as sure as I’m a student in divinity!

“Mr. S. Strome is informed that the young lady who has been living for the last four months at No. 97, Falkirk Road, needs looking after. She has not been behaving in a becoming or prudent manner. There is an old admirer in the case. If you wish to save her from worse folly than she has committed already, you had better see her within the next twenty-four hours.”

‘Now, what is at the bottom of this? Crafty men condemn anonymous letters; simple men admire them; wise men use

them. This philanthropist seems to be adequately informed as to names and dates: is the rest a lie? "An old admirer;" it can't be the sergeant? Pshaw!—Women are said to be unaccountable though. Suppose it were true; suppose she and her old admirer had made it up and eloped; would I be glad or sorry? Speak out, Sebastian! no one hears you. Humph! it's not to be decided in a moment. I'll see her first—I'll go at once! And run my head into the trap my nameless philanthropist has prepared for me? No. Jealousy is his bait, but he mistakes his fish. "Worse folly," is it? Why not the most sensible course in the circumstances? Why interfere? Tell the truth, Sebastian: you'd be glad to be rid of it all! Well! But it can't be true, she wouldn't do it! Still, how do I know? October—it's two months since I saw her. But the thing's impossible—it's absurd! Then the less reason why I should go there. Humph! it needs thinking about. I'll have a bout with the tools, and wait for an inspiration. So Providence hadn't

quite given me up after all. "And the taste of worldly pleasure was made bitter." Confess, St. Augustine, among your many confessions, that you were the least taste in life of a humbug !

Thus soliloquising the student in divinity left the breakfast-table, and betook himself to the stand in the window. He examined the half-finished sandal-wood box, holding it in various positions nearer or farther from his eyes, and frowning and whistling over it after the manner of a sagacious handicraftsman ; then selected a file and a small chisel from the tools on the lower shelf, and settled himself quietly to work. To look at him, you would have said he was wholly absorbed in his occupation.

In the mid-career of his operative energy a knock came at the door. He worked on until it was repeated ; then laid down his chisel, clenched his teeth together (a common trick of his, and in no way indicative of a specially savage mood), and said sharply, 'Come in !'



CHAPTER X.

AN APOSTATE.

HE door opened, and a short, pale, plump young gentleman, with a heavy mouth, sandy upright hair, and an eyeglass, made his appearance in a tentative manner on the threshold. Being invited to come forward, he did so in a still dubious but always amiable manner, keeping the eyeglass-furnished side of his person constantly in advance, and making short steps, as a person might do who walked in darkness, and feared invisible barriers or pitfalls.

‘I’m afraid I’m interrupting you when

'you're busy,' said this personage, in a slow-moving falsetto voice—a kind of voice more suggestive of chronic amiability than perhaps any other in the world. 'I thought I'd look you up, you know, after last night.'

'Sit down, Smillet, and try to be sympathetic for once in your life!' said the other, rising to meet and shake hands with him, and put him in a chair. 'You are the only man in London in whom my soul yearns spontaneously to confide. Were you a Jesuit priest, and I a Roman Catholic, I'd make a permanent contract with you to confess me.'

'Strome, how you do go on! Why would you do that, pray?'

'Never mind; asking questions is not your forte. We are spiritual complements of each other—positive and negative poles—plus and minus signs. Take your coat off.'

Mr. Smillet observed his friend for a moment, his head tipped back, and his short thick nose appearing to snuff up the information which the eyes of a less near-sighted

person would have afforded him. He then unbuttoned and disembarrassed himself of his top-coat, emitting little disjointed murmurs the while—inarticulate chirpings of conventional civility. He finally reseated himself, passed his plump taper-fingered hands up through his hair, settled his eye-glass, and smiled.

An odd sort of comradeship existed between these two dissimilar men. Smillet, some nine months previous to this date, had unexpectedly come into possession of a large property. Like Strome, he was the only son of a clergyman, and had always looked forward to following the clerical calling, and for some time he and Strome had pursued their studies together. Smillet, however, had had periods of great anxiety and spiritual distress as to his personal fitness for the cure of souls; and his naïve fears lest he might become the means of consigning multitudes, himself included, to everlasting torments, used greatly to amuse his even-tempered but somewhat saturnine colleague; nor did the

latter refrain, in a spirit half-curious, half-mischievous, from occasionally exasperating this sore place in poor Smillet's consciousness, and studying his shrinkings. But in the midst of these exercises came the grand transformation scene of the legacy. Smillet with three thousand a year might cut the Gordian knot of doubts which had harassed Smillet with two hundred and fifty. He gave up the ministry on the spot, and entered upon the life of a man about town. His inner man developed an unsuspected serenity and self-possession—his money actually seemed to do him spiritual good. He formally abjured all pretension to ascetic virtues and strict principles; but the effect of this abjuration was not to make him immoral, but to remove the temptations to be so which had previously beset him. He wore conspicuous cravats and knowing hats; he was to be seen at the fashionable clubs and theatres; he shunned not the society of the harum-scarum and the dissolute; but he failed to be dissolute or harum-scarum himself. He would sit for

hours amidst his gay companions, piping out his little remarks or repartees as occasion demanded, lifting up his funny thick nose with its wide inquiring nostrils, smiling with inveterate good-humour, and readjusting his ever-unstable eyeglass, which he had adopted in lieu of spectacles at the outset of his fashionable career; but to active evil he seemed to have no inclinations. He enjoyed a quite illogical popularity among his associates, and even exercised—without himself being aware of it—a certain degree of influence over them. He appeared to like almost everybody; but to one person he was devoted, and that person was Sebastian Strome. He held and promulgated the belief that Strome was destined to be one of the grand figures of history. He discerned in him the elements of a Napoleon, a Luther, a Newton. And Strome, who recognised, or fancied he recognised, in some of Smillet's qualities and tendencies a quaint caricature of his own, treated him with a unique combination of mild toleration—or even

deference—and of ironic brusqueness, that might have puzzled a less simple person. He often spoke to his amiable little acquaintance with an openness and lack of reserve which he certainly would not have shown towards any one of deeper intellectual perceptions ; but Smillet accepted it all so much as a matter of course, and of small importance at that, as quite to disarm misgiving. He, moreover, delivered himself on all points with an unstudied bluntness that must occasionally have made Strome wince. But a really strong man enjoys receiving a fair home-thrust almost as much as giving one : it begets mutual confidence and respect.

‘ What is that you are working at so hard ? ’ Smillet inquired, as Strome resumed his file and chisel, and applied himself again to the box.

‘ I’m working at my trade.’

‘ No, you’re not ; preaching is your trade.’

‘ Preaching is to be my profession : learn to discriminate your terms, Thomas Smillet.

What a man does is not necessarily one with what he professes.'

'Well, I always heard that to practise a trade is to do something you get paid for. Now you'll get paid for preaching, and you won't get paid for that thing—what is it? it smells nicely!—so I maintain that preaching is your trade.'

'Good! Pity you didn't stick to preaching, Thomas; yours is the artless but pithy logic which belongs to the babe and suckling. Yes; I shall get paid for preaching, and paid well, too! Like twenty thousand other more or less needy gentlemen in England I shall, when asked whether I think in my heart that I am divinely called to the order and ministry of the priesthood, lay my hand over my pocket and reply, "I think it." Still, it's well to have two strings to one's bow, my Thomas.'

'I say, Strome, a fellow like you—a really great man, you know—ought to get out of the habit of talking the way you do. It don't so much matter what you say to me,

because I know you don't mean it. When I thought of ordination, I knew it would be a lie that I should have to tell, and it bothered me so that I do believe I should have funked it when it came to the point, even if I hadn't inherited the—— well, of course you've a right to grin, but I do believe so, really. But in your case, now, of course anybody can see that you are divinely called, if ever any man was, and so you've no business to pretend to make light of it in the way you do. What's the use of a great man except to be an example?—what I mean is, that's one of his uses. Besides, as for money, you'll be well enough off when you're—— by-and-by, won't you?

‘By-and-by, perhaps,’ said Strome, blowing some sawdust out of a crevice. Presently he added: ‘What is your candid opinion, Smillet, of a man who marries a fortune?’

‘I suppose you mean, what do I think of your marrying a fortune?’

‘Well, then, what do you think of it?’

‘Well, as to your case, of course I don't

know any of the circumstances—any of the particulars; but, who ever the lady is, I think she's to be congratulated. She's got what no money can buy—that's a man of genius; and since you know you're a genius, and that money can't buy you, no thought about her money ever entered your head, and I believe you engaged to marry her because you—because you loved each other, and that sort of thing !

Strome eyed his plump little visitor out of his black eye, while his blue one seemed to be abstractedly weighing the value of his judgment. After a pause he said, clenching his teeth and smiling: ' You have a genius for faith, Thomas; did you ever happen to move a mountain? But we were talking about carving. You see, a man must allow for vicissitudes. Suppose something were to happen to annul my marriage prospects and to compromise my ecclesiastical expectations. I should then have nothing but these tools to fall back on. The day may come when I shall have to carve children's toys for a living !'

‘Oh, I dare say ! I pity the children that go without toys until you make them some. Tell me something else !’ squeaked Thomas gleefully. ‘By the look of things at the Mulberry last night, I shouldn’t think money was what you’d ever need. I’m sure poor Culver doesn’t think so. He says you won four hundred——’

‘Hold your tongue, Thomas ! Remember Mrs. Blister.’

‘My idea is, you know, you ought to give all that up—gambling and so on. Suppose it was to get out, where would you be ?’

‘At work on this box, of course.’

‘Oh, is that the something you were afraid might happen ?’

‘No.’

Smillet crossed his legs and rubbed his hands up through his hair. ‘If you really don’t feel inclined to go into the Church, Strome, why do you go ?’ he inquired. ‘There’s enough else you could do ; a fellow like you could do anything. You might be prime minister, or viceroy of India, if you gave your

mind to it ; and then your gambling and that sort of thing would make less difference. There was Fox, for instance ; he was a tremendous gambler, but he was a tremendous fellow in Parliament all the same.'

' Did it never occur to you, Smillet, that the cause of Fox being such a tremendous gambler may have been that Parliament didn't give him excitement enough ? We are not all of us so happily constituted as you, my trusty Tom ; the demon in our brains demands employment or he will devour us. Now the one sole inexhaustible field for man or demon is the Church ! One gets tired of other things. I can conceive that politics, or the army, or domestic bliss, or even the London season and the Mulberry Club, might pall upon a man in the course of ages. But the Church—never !

All this was said by Strome with a certain picturesqueness of tone and facial expression which, more than anything else, had made people believe him handsome. There was also a greater than usual earnestness in his

manner, though underlying all was the ineradicable affectation or self-consciousness which in a greater or less degree showed in his every word and act. It might be the affectation of a powerful mind ; but there, at all events, it was. Tom Smillet threw up his nose, and, having snuffed a moment or two in silence, said :

‘ I can’t make out whether you’re joking or in earnest. If you’re not in earnest, I think it is a poor joke ; and if it’s not a joke, I don’t think it’s to your credit. A fellow oughtn’t to go into the Church just to keep himself amused. You’d better do like me ! ’ concluded Thomas, in his most imperturbable falsetto.

‘ Perhaps you’re right, Tom ; and the thing is not impossible. A wise man can become a fool, though the reverse is not true. But between being a Smillet and being a priest I see no other alternative for me. I should like to be a Jesuit.’

‘ Come, I say ! that’s a Roman Catholic ! ’

‘ To show you the very bottom of my soul,

Smillet—the Roman Catholic is the only genuine Church in existence! If I didn't know that the progress of Ritualism would save me the trouble, I'd go over at once. Ignatius Loyola! there was a man!

‘I won't sit still and hear such stuff!’ declared Smillet, fixing his eyeglass with immense decision. ‘I tell you what it is, Strome: your conversation is apt to be confoundedly stupid and objectionable, and I sometimes think it's odd how I and other fellows put up with it in the way we do. But it's the way you have of saying things that gets us; it doesn't seem to matter what you say. If I'd only heard another fellow tell me what you say, and hadn't seen you saying it myself, I should never have suspected there was anything great in you. I shouldn't really.’

‘Upon my word, Tom, you are heroic this morning,’ said Strome, laughing; his laugh somewhat recalled his father's, and was his most agreeable manifestation. He relinquished his carving, and going to the cup-

board beneath the writing-table, he brought out a bottle of wine and two glasses, which he filled. 'Your visit has had such a good effect on me that I positively feel hospitable,' he said. 'Here's to the way you and I have of saying things; long may it continue to "get them." Have a cigarette?'

'Do you talk that way—about Jesuits and so on—to your governor?' demanded Smillet, after sipping his wine, and before lighting his cigarette.

'Let my governor alone, if you please,' responded the other with sudden grimness. 'Are you going to be at the club to-night?'

'I don't know; but that fellow Fawley is coming, they say.'

'Humph! I've been expecting him to turn up for some time past. I wonder whether he plays as good a hand at cards as when we were at Oxford?'

'You were great cronies at Oxford, weren't you?'

'Bosom friends, Thomas; we lived but for each other. Then came misunderstandings

—coldness ; and I became prematurely a sceptic and a sneering, cynical worldling ; while he, being already a Jew, could do no more than remain what he was—unless he improved, that is to say. However, I mean to make it all up with him to-night.'

' Oh, by-the-bye, what are you going to do between now and dinner ? Because, if you like, I'll drive you round to my place to lunch, and then I've got tickets to hear Jenny Lind at three. Will you come ?'

Strome did not immediately answer. He leant back in his chair, with his arms folded, and his black eye fixed upon his visitor. The peculiarity of Strome's double-barrelled gaze, which left its object in doubt whether he were being pointed at or not, and which therefore took him in a comparatively defenceless state, was never able to disconcert Smillet, for the simple reason that he was too near-sighted to be aware of it. Strome, however, had no present idea of disconcerting him.

' Are you superstitious, Smillet ?' he demanded.

‘Superstitious!’ cried Smillet, with genial scorn; ‘do I look like it?’

‘Everybody is either superstitious or religious, you know,’ returned the other with a smile. ‘I confess I am inclined to be superstitious this morning. I am going to settle a question which may affect my whole future existence by an appeal to chance; and you, Thomas Smillet—tremble not—are to be the instrument of fate. Do you see this piece of paper?’ he continued, holding up the anonymous letter.

‘Well, what of it?’

‘It is inscribed with certain mystic words, which render it as different from any other paper in the world as I, O Thomas, am different from you. I now, as you see, tear this magic scroll into two pieces of unequal length; I fold them up into small compass, and taking one in each hand, and holding my hands behind my back, I bid you declare whether the longer piece be in my right hand or in my left?’

Smillet, highly entertained with this fantas-

tic preliminary, put himself in a judicial attitude, and prepared to choose. 'Oh, wait a moment, though,' he piped; 'you haven't told me what's to happen in case I guess right?'

'In that case I accept your invitation to luncheon and Jenny Lind.'

'Is that all? You said it would affect your whole future.'

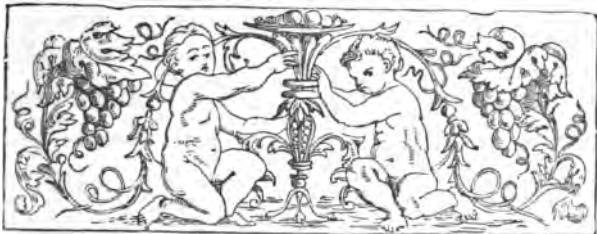
'You forget, Thomas, that by going with you I shall be prevented from going somewhere else. No more words—choose.'

'Well, now,' said Smillet, prodding himself with his eyeglass, and manifestly exhilarated by the importance of the crisis, 'suppose, now—I mean, I choose—the right—no, I'll choose the left hand.'

'Jenny Lind it is,' said Strome, examining the two fragments of paper with a smile. 'All right; that agrees with my own judgment, not that I really believe it makes a particle of odds, one way or the other.'

He put the torn letter on the fire, and

having exchanged his dressing-gown for outdoor garments, he took his hat and one of his massive walking-sticks, and followed Smillet out of the room.



CHAPTER XI.

THE MULBERRIES.

HE Mulberry Club occupied rooms up a darksome and narrow flight of stairs, in an antique hostelry not far from Covent Garden Market.

In respect of social and political occurrences, scandalous and otherwise, a modern club discharges a function somewhat akin to that of the chorus in the old Greek drama. It passes comment, according to its lights, upon the various current acts and episodes of the great human tragedy of which itself forms a part. There are, however, several easily-noted points of difference between it and its

ancient predecessor. The club's judgments, if not more intellectual, are at all events less emotional than those of the chorus, and, it may be added, less harmonious. The former delivers itself from a less insipid moral standpoint than the latter; it substitutes modern cynicism for primeval ingenuousness, and scepticism stands it instead of sympathy. A club, in fact, is a man of the world writ large—or, rather, boiled down; since men of the world, when they get together, act as solvents of any lingering traces of unworldliness in one another's composition, and as stimulants to all tendencies of the opposite kind.

Upon the whole, a man would rather belong to a good London club than to the most harmonious ancient Greek chorus. Poetical conceptions, and the grandest rhythmical utterance of them, seem imperfect compensation for the cosy club fireside, the spicy stories, the scathing satire, the pregnant innuendoes, the pipes, and the toddy. Nor, to ascend from the general to the particular, could the best equipped of Greek choruses

have discussed the character, prospects, and antecedents of any given member who happened to be for the moment absent—as, for example, of Mr. Sebastian Strome—with anything at all resembling the shrewdness, the pungency, and the minuteness lavished upon it by the Mulberries. Human nature, seen through a drop of brandy and water, and aureoled with tobacco-smoke, is worth all the moral abstractions that were ever invented. ‘Abstract morality, indeed!’ as Ephraim Arch, the wag, used to say; ‘abstract it, by all means, and let us have the major’s song over again.’

It was a sacred tradition of the Mulberry Club, which every member was bound to maintain and even to believe, that the cracked and worm-eaten old pint-measure, which stood under a glass shade on the mantelpiece, was made out of a piece of Shakespeare’s mulberry-tree, and was presented by the immortal bard, at the time of his leaving London, to a small knot of personal friends and kindred spirits, who were the original founders of the later

club. We are in no respect concerned to question the authenticity of this charming legend. There, at all events, was the pint measure, with a hieroglyphic scratched upon it which the faithful interpreted as the initials W. S. The club had occupied its present rooms from a period of remote antiquity. It was composed, during its earlier generations, almost exclusively of the higher class of Shakespearian tragedians and comedians—fine old fellows, redolent of humour and deportment, with resonant enunciations, stalwart stage chuckles, and an understanding of a leg of mutton in its quiddity. In later times this exclusiveness had been in some respects relaxed; perhaps there were no longer enough Shakespearian artists of the better class to fill up the muster-roll. They took in an outsider here and there; but always a man with something in him—not necessarily in his pocket, for the club was in perfectly easy circumstances, owning its own freehold, and being besides in possession of numerous legacies bequeathed by deceased

members, the combined income from which would have supported it well enough, had the living members pretermitted their subscriptions altogether. There was no club in London that had such good wines, and so cheap by the bottle. There were not many clubs that had such a good *chef*—or one who drew so generous a salary. With all this, the Mulberry Club was very little known; many a man who fancied he knew London well had never so much as heard of its existence. The Mulberries, indeed, piqued themselves upon this proud retirement and reticence; it was one of their unwritten laws that no member was ever to mention the name of the club, or anything that had occurred within its walls, in the hearing of any one not connected with the club. The maintenance of this secrecy was rendered easier by the fact that there were so few persons to keep the secret; the roll of membership being limited to thirty-seven (perhaps in allusion to the number of the immortal bard's plays), and not always mustering even that.

The club accommodation consisted of three rooms: one large sitting-room on the first-floor, and two smaller chambers overhead. The dusky walls of the sitting-room—so much of them as rose above the cracked and battered wainscot—were embellished with a dozen old mezzotints and engravings of by-gone stage celebrities, male and female, each depicted in a favourite rôle and attitude. Sculpture was represented by a plaster bust of Shakespeare over the front doorway, which time and tobacco-smoke had tinted a mellow brown, and which cobwebs of fifty years' standing (unmolested in obedience to a by-law of the club) had veiled in a grey obscurity eminently dignified and appropriate. There was a piano in one corner of the room, now somewhat decrepit, but said to have responded in its day to the touch of I know not what renowned musicians and composers; and each one of the six or seven veteran mahogany tables was assigned by tradition to some histrionic genius of yore, who had habitually eaten his chops and drunk his wine

while seated at it, and by the name of whom it was now distinguished. There was, moreover, an adequate array of chairs of various designs, but all alike in respect of sturdiness of limb and rung, and that best of polish which is wrought by much friction of reposeful shoulders and elbows. The antique chimney-piece jutted out pent-roofwise over the spacious hearth ; and when, of a winter's night, the deep grate was filled with glowing coals, and the clock in the corner pointed to eleven, and Ashe, the grey-whiskered, bald-headed, reverential little waiter, was responding with methodical alacrity to the general aspiration for toddy—at such a time did the chosen Mulberries love to draw around the hearth, to puff their pipes, to tinkle their spoons, and to discourse one with another, critically, cynically, wittily, disputatiously, or scandalously, as it may happen. What effete Greek chorus ever enjoyed itself or pulled to pieces the réputation of its friends as they did then !

It was nearly twelve o'clock, and three

only of the Mulberries were left sitting there in front of the fire : Jasper Grannit (a son of Lord Porphyry's before that late lamented peer's marriage), Fred Culver, and Ephraim Arch.

Mr. Grannit, it should be premised, was just returned from a prolonged foreign tour, and this was his first appearance in the club since two or three years. He was some five-and-forty years of age, but looking older, with a medium figure, long dark face, stiff grey hair and whiskers. He was a brilliant fellow, but a good deal embittered by his peculiar position in the world and his experience of life. Twelve years ago he had written three very successful comedies, which had had the double effect of rendering him a literary lion of the first rank, and of annulling that codicil in his noble father's will apportioning him a legacy of twenty thousand pounds. From that time forth Jasper had nothing but his own wits whereby to support himself ; and though they had proved fully adequate to the purpose, Mr. Grannit remained none the less

in an attitude of unobtrusive but unmitigable animosity towards Lord Porphyry, and, for his sake, towards the British aristocracy at large. He acted as foreign correspondent for the great Liberal newspapers ; he wrote pungent essays and clever novels. He was a most agreeable companion, though laconic rather than voluble of speech ; but what he said was uttered so gracefully, and in so melodious a voice, and there was withal a vein of such polished sardonic banter in many of his remarks, that most young men, and not a few old ones, were more or less under the spell of his fascination. He had mixed with all classes and nationalities of men, and had mastered the wisdom of the world : how best to enjoy its pleasures and parry its inconveniences, and—rarer knowledge still—how to sneer with courtesy. He was always faultlessly dressed, except that his jewellery was considered by some critics to be rather more expensive in quality, and a trifle more conspicuously worn, than severe taste demanded ; and his manners were so good as to be

generally esteemed old-fashioned. He never smoked, but indulged his handsome aquiline nose with delicate pinches of snuff, taken from a gold snuff-box presented to him by his father before their quarrel, and bearing on its lid the crest and arms of the family. It was the current belief that Jasper Grannit would not have accepted a fortune in ready money in exchange for that snuff-box, which no one would have valued at ten guineas ; but no one had ever cared to rally Mr. Grannit regarding his inconsistency on this point. It was not a promising subject for conversation ; and Mr. Grannit, notwithstanding his uniform politeness, was understood to have imbibed certain fantastic Continental notions of honour, and of modes of vindicating the same, which are happily not in vogue in this country. Mr. Grannit's chair was drawn close up to the left-hand side of the fireplace, in such a position that his own face was in shadow, while those of his companions, sitting opposite, were fully illuminated. He was constitutionally prone to diplomacy and finesse, and was often subtle

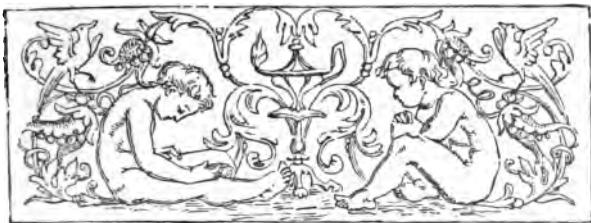
from mere habit, and without any special object in view.

Fred Culver, who was nearest him, was of quite another tendency. His egotism, instead of being withdrawn towards the centre of his moral organism, was spread over his outside, like the mantle of some kinds of shell-fish. Composure, dignity, reticence—these qualities were most foreign to him. He was continually feeling irritated or flattered, none save he knew wherefore. His bilious attacks, his neuralgia, his last night's dream, his to-morrow's pleasure trip, were all that seemed to him worth talking about. If his little finger ached, he cried ; if he was tickled, he laughed ; if he was snubbed, he flew into a passion. If any member of the club happened to taste an onion, or wear squeaky boots, Culver memorialised the committee, and declared that either he or the offender must leave the premises. A spoilt child like this is apt to get his own way in the world ; people are too lazy or too timid to cross him. Culver was long, lank,

sallow, straight-haired, and nervous ; he always dressed in black broad-cloth, smoked the strongest cigars he could buy, and bit his finger-nails to the quick. Ephraim Arch, the club humourist, was in the habit of declaring that his sole objection to Culver was the latter's musical faculty, which prevented him (Arch) from slaughtering him twice or thrice every day. Culver, in fact, though his conversational voice was harsh, possessed what was at that time considered the finest baritone in England, when he chose to uplift it in song. Unfortunately for his daily associates, this was not so often nor so regularly as would have been the case had he been dependent upon it for his livelihood. But Culver was the son of a wealthy merchant, and had always lived in luxury, and sang only when the mood took him. For the rest, he was still (at the age of thirty) sowing his wild oats—not very big oats, nor many of them, but (to quote Arch once more) he made up for it by cackling over each one like a hen over a new-laid egg.

As for Arch, he had a dry, homely air with him that served to give his witticisms projection, so to speak; it was, indeed, in the opinion of his detractors, the only funny thing about them. But it was as an actor that Arch had made his real mark; his talent and versatility were of the first order; the ease and completeness with which he assumed a part suggesting a doubt as to whether what purported to be his real self might not be one of the less successful of his impersonations. His garb was shabby, ill-cut, and formal; but it was worn with so much address and physical self-possession as to appear becoming. Except when his tongue was going, Arch had the look of a man who cogitates deeply and solidly within himself, and pays no attention whatever to what is going on around him. Those who knew him best, however, affirmed this to be a mere deceitful appearance or snare; that Ephraim had the longest ears and the best memory in London; and that no old tea-drinking woman outdid him in love of gossip, or in store of

material wherewith to carry it on. Since, in addition to these accomplishments, he possessed a caustic tongue, and a wonderful faculty of detecting the scandalous aspect of things apparently the most innocent, the uniform friendliness with which he was treated in the club may have been due, less to an appreciation of his social charms, than to a misgiving lest he might, if provoked, too clearly demonstrate his genius for social malediction.



CHAPTER XII.

MEANING MISCHIEF.

ESE three gentlemen had been sitting for the last five minutes without uttering a word. At the end of that time, Jasper Grannit took advantage of the superfluous breath, which he had been compelled to collect in the course of a somewhat complicated yawn, to say:

‘Ashe!’

‘Yes, sir!’ responded Ashe from behind the screen, and advancing with respectful shoulders and looks askance.

‘Would you mind getting me a drop more

cognac?' continued Grannit, drooping his eyelids in a world-weary manner habitual with him.

'Me, too, Ashe,' said Ephraim. 'No more for Mr. Culver—he can only afford one go this evening.'

Ashe bowed and glided off.

'It seems to me very bad taste to chaff a man in the presence of a servant!' remarked Culver, in the tone of a candid person who has for a long time been concentrating his attention upon a distasteful problem.

Arch replied with an air of saddened conviction :

'Ah! you never had any consideration for servants, Culver. They need to be amused occasionally—makes 'em work better.'

'What's the matter?' inquired Grannit, sitting up, and languidly feeling for his snuff-box.

'This Arch-humourist of ours was so impressed by my losing at cards last night, that he seems unable to think of anything else,' said Culver, making the biting of his

nails a pretext for twisting his features into a malevolent grimace while he spoke. 'I really can't understand what concern it is of his.'

'Is there much of that going on now?' pursued Grannit indifferently.

'Ever since Strome took to it—about three months ago. I must say I can't understand a student of divinity being so fond of cards, and so remarkably lucky with them too! He would show better taste to leave them alone.'

'Better respect for your pocket, I admit,' put in Ephraim.

'Strome, Strome,' murmured Grannit, taking snuff, and seeming to question his memory between the inhalations. 'Who is Strome? or what is he? I can't place him.' It was a trait of this gentleman to be indolently ignorant of what everybody else knew; but in the present instance his long absence from London afforded him an excuse.

'He's not a person I think much of,' said Culver.

‘Which shows a truly magnanimous soul, considering he’s got five hundred pounds of your money in his pocket! Ah, here’s the grog! Now I, on the contrary, think a good deal of him, though he never won a penny from me in his life: and I happen to know a thing or two about him too. He might have been a capital actor by this time if he’d begun the study ten years ago.’

‘University man?’

‘Oxford. Was there with Fawley. You know Fawley? that little sixty-per-cent., who got in here last year because I was down with sciatica and couldn’t attend the election. They were at school together too; Strome beat him in scholarships. There never was any comparison between ‘em as to brains, though; Fawley never could come near him.’

‘I don’t see how you can venture to make such a statement,’ interposed Culver. ‘I happen to know the contrary—everybody knows it! Strome quarrelled with him precisely because Fawley was the better man, and Strome can’t bear a rival.’

‘Seems to be a discrepancy here,’ observed Grannit, not unwilling to be entertained with a fracas between his two companions.

‘Ignorance is Culver’s foible rather than his fault,’ said Ephraim indulgently. ‘The truth is, Strome was fool enough—being then young and inexperienced—to take compassion on Fawley’s ineptitude, and spend all his time coaching him for the Mods. They both came out somewhere among the first, and Fawley was above Strome, as Strome meant he should be. Strome was an enthusiastic sort of fellow at that period, and if his friend had asked him for the loan of his soul for a week or two, would have handed it over at once.’

‘Quite a lovely character, ’pon my word ; how came he to idolise Mr. Fawley to that degree ?’

‘A touch of nature ; I’ll sell it to you for your next novel : he gave him such a gorgeous thrashing at school one day that ever after he loved him and couldn’t do enough

for him. I shouldn't wonder, now, if Culver didn't believe that !

Culver, thus appealed to, threw up his arms, and uttered a brief, rasping shriek of laughter. He then relapsed into contemptuous silence. Ephraim took a sip from his tumbler, lifted one eyebrow at Grannit, who did not respond to the signal, and continued :

‘ After the Mods Fawley developed into a fine specimen of viper. He told pretty much the same story that Culver has swallowed. Strome was too proud to deny it, broke his heart over it in private, forswore all faith in human nature, and so forth. A moving tale, my masters ! The long and short of it is, Fawley is not only bad form, but he owes me five pounds ; and I shan't give you another version of the story until he repays it.’

Grannit smiled graciously. ‘ By-the-way, seems to me I once met a Strome, a collector, or governor, or something, out in India.’

‘ Sebastian's uncle. Left him eight thousand pounds, free of conditions. It was in the Four per Cents. the last I heard of it.’

‘I’ll wager it hasn’t been there during the last three months!’ exclaimed Culver. ‘He must have had nearly as much as that in his pocket last night.’

‘What was the game?’ Grannit inquired, drooping his eyelids.

‘Ecarté. He thinks himself a great player, but I never saw such a run of luck in my life. It won’t occur again!’

‘Ah! He’s going to give you your revenge, then?’

‘Perhaps Culver doesn’t feel quite so revengeful as he would do if runs of luck were less apt to follow Strome’s play. For my part I wouldn’t mind risking that fiver Fawley owes me that Culver never has luck as long as he plays against Strome.’

‘Pon my word, you interest me. I should like to see this—er—paragon. By-the-bye, did somebody call him a divinity student?’

‘Aha, yes! and the son of a Church of England clergyman!’ cried the unappeasable Culver. ‘I suppose Arch will have an excuse ready for that too; but I must say I consider

it scandalous, and in my opinion such a person should not be allowed to remain in the club. I shall bring it before the committee !

‘On what grounds does your worship propose to demand his dismissal ?’ asked Ephraim, making the square tops of his fingers meet in front of his face, and smiling covertly in the retirement thus afforded.

‘What grounds ? Isn’t it grounds enough that a man who pretends to be preparing himself to preach the Gospel should go about card-sharping——’

‘Card-sharping ?’ came gently from Granlit’s lips, as he reclined placidly in his chair with half-closed eyes.

‘Well, card-playing, then ; it ought not to be put up with, whichever you call it.’

‘It may be all one to you,’ Ephraim said ; ‘but before investigating that point I should like to know whether you ever played with Strome, or saw him playing, in other places besides this club ?’

‘I never have anything to do with him

anywhere except here—it isn't likely! One place is quite enough for me!' returned Culver, throwing up his elbows, and crossing one knee over the other spitefully.

'In that case, my ingenuous young friend, you will lay no information against Strome; remembering that, by the unwritten law of the Mulberry Club, you can bring no indictment against practices which the unwritten law of the club permits within its premises. And, by the same token, neither can you, under penalty of expulsion, expatriate upon such matters to any persons not connected with the club. So now what are you going to do?'

Culver jerked himself out of his chair, and after prancing erratically about the room for a while, flounced down before the piano, smote the keys, and broke out into song. Ephraim laughed quietly to himself as he finished his tumbler, and Grannit sat up and took another pinch of snuff.

'I used to be considered a tolerable hand at cards in my earlier days,' the latter pre-

sently observed ; 'but Mr. Strome appears to be a champion.'

'Not he ! he plays no better than Culver himself ; only he can keep his own counsel, and his own countenance, too, which that long-armed grasshopper cannot.'

'You're not altogether partial to grasshoppers ?'

'There's no real harm in 'em ; only they have to be taken out and exercised, once in a while, for the benefit of their bilious systems. Nobody else will take the job off my hands, so I occasionally devote myself in the interests of the common weal. He'll be as quiet as a lamb as soon as he's had his song out.'

'Such an office as yours should not remain honorary in the club : not that money could recompense it, either. Mr. Strome is not quite the moral and mental colossus that you painted him, then ?'

Arch laid his head over towards his right shoulder, and scrutinised Mr. Grannit's eye-lids with a dry smile.

‘Mr. Strome is a tolerably fair specimen of a man as men go,’ said he ; ‘but if you want a trustworthy opinion of him, your best plan will be to form one from personal—— Speak of an angel, and you hear his wings ! How do, Strome ? You’re late. Ha ! Smillet. Strome, here’s a man desirous to make your acquaintance. Mr. Jasper Grannit, Mr. Sebastian Strome. Mr. Grannit is an old member ; been away on the Continent. Let me also present Tommy Smillet—the club baby ! Friends, this is an auspicious occasion —Christmas is not far off. What say you to a loving cup ?’

Strome, who had made his appearance in the room abruptly and almost noiselessly, according to the law of his physical movements, and who, after shaking hands with Grannit, had been warming himself at the fire, and unbuttoning and throwing back the cape of his top coat, now looked at Arch and said with a smile :

‘That American tour of yours got you into bad habits, Eph. We don’t ask strangers to

drink in this country. Moreover, Smillet and I have just dined. Good-evening, Culver.'

Culver had left the piano, and was moving aimlessly about the room, shrugging his thin square shoulders, wagging his head about on his slender neck, and transferring his hands from coat pockets to those of his trowsers ; then clasping them behind him, and anon hitching a thumb into either arm-hole of his waistcoat. On hearing his name spoken, he stood still and gazed in several directions, one after the other. When, at length, his eyes fell upon Strome, he started, as if then for the first time aware of his presence, and said in a tone of icy constraint :

'I beg your pardon. Did you address me ?'

Strome immediately went up to him, and putting his hand on his shoulder with a friendly but semi-authoritative air, said laughingly, 'Come, Culver !'

Culver made a momentary effort to maintain his uncompromising attitude ; but the

sight of Strome's face, in such point-blank proximity to his own, seemed to dissolve his resolution; the rigidity of his knees and elbows, and the haughtiness of his throat, underwent a thaw.

'I—hem!—I didn't expect to see you to-night,' he said in a thin voice.

'You will see a great deal of me to-night,' Strome answered with heartiness, adding in a lower tone: 'Did you suppose I could sleep with that great wad of bank-notes on my conscience? You must help me off with it.'

'Another gentleman anxious to be presented to Mr. Strome,' said Ephraim Arch's dry resonant voice, close behind Sebastian's shoulder.

And he, turning, found himself face to face with Selim Fawley, who had come in while he was engaged with Culver. He held out his hand at once, and grasped Fawley's moist, nerveless fingers. The latter appeared somewhat exhilarated, either from having dined

generously, or for some other reason, and his manner was effusive.

‘Strome, old man, so glad to see you ! Look here, now—bygones be bygones, eh ? I’ve been on the Continent, you know—Paris, Vienna, and all that. Only got back a few days ago. I say, I had a glimpse of your governor and some mutual friends, you know. All right. So glad to find you here ! Let’s make a night of it.’

‘Hear, hear !’ said Ephraim. ‘Mr. Fawley has spoken the sense of the meeting ; is it not so, my masters ? We will adjourn to the Star Chamber ; Ashe shall brew us a bowl of punch, and then he may go to bed. There are six of us here : what say you to a little faro ? I want to win five pounds from Fawley.’

‘The best thing you fellows can do is to go home and go to bed,’ piped Smillet from the corner of the fireplace, where he had been conversing with Jasper Grannit. ‘It’s to-morrow morning already ! I’m sleepy.’

‘You must be instructed how to keep your

eyes open, Thomas,' said Strome, taking off his top coat and throwing it over his arm. 'I presume,' he added, pausing and letting his two-fold glance travel from face to face, 'that all here are illuminati—we all know the laws of the Star Chamber, and the penalties? Mr. Grannit, your three years' exile won't prevent you—'

'On the contrary,' said Grannit, with a bland smile. He had been standing with a pinch of snuff delicately imprisoned between his thumb and forefinger, his half-closed eyes sagaciously studying the scene. He now bent forward, and applied the pinch with all the grace and fastidious expressiveness of an eighteenth century beau, flicked away the stray particles from the front of his evening dress with his silk handkerchief, and inserted his hands gently into his trowser pockets.

With the exception of Smillet, there seemed to be a unanimous spirit possessing the company in favour of the Star Chamber (as one of the two smaller rooms on the second floor had been nicknamed) and faro. By a curious

coincidence, Arch's proposition had given words to the secret desire of all present; Arch himself being, probably, the least serious of them all in his ulterior purposes.

There was a pause, while each covertly inspected the others, as if to divine the force and capacity of the antagonists with whom he was to contend. But while the regards of Culver, of Grannit, and of Fawley, were bent chiefly upon Strome, his were mainly concentrated upon Fawley only; he was not concerned about the rest. This was the first time that Fawley and Strome had met with any outward profession of cordiality. Was it merely for the purpose of getting to sufficiently close quarters to try another and conclusive fall? These two men had been natural enemies for some years past, and each had aimed blows at the other's dearest interests; now they had met, by fate or accident, for a final engagement. Which should win? Strome's nature was compact of victorious elements; but there are times when the demon of luck goes mad, and runs

amuck of all laws, human and divine. What was the meaning of Fawley's abnormal exhilaration? Was it an extra glass of wine merely, or did he feel the inspiration of a fatal success, uncontrollable by himself and irresistible to others?

The party now proceeded upstairs to the Star Chamber, marshalled on their way by Ashe, bearing a steaming bowl of punch. Smillet came last, rubbing the back of his round head, and emitting inarticulate croakings.



CHAPTER XIII.

HIS WIFE?

 N Thursday morning the occupant of the back room on the first floor of No. 97, Falkirk Road, awoke to a sense of having an exciting and arduous journey to perform. It was colder than yesterday, and the dull grey clouds, a square section of which was visible above the soiled muslin window-screen, foreboded snow. The ashes of last night's fire lay dead in the grate. Near the door stood a moderate-sized trunk, ready packed, but still open, to receive whatever articles might turn up at the last moment. Upon

the end of the trunk was fastened a label bearing the address, 'Mrs. Francis, Cedarhurst,' written in a drooping, feminine hand. The floor was strewn with odds-and-ends of rubbish, such as most human beings, about to change one place or start for another, leave behind them.

The young woman described upon the trunk-label as Mrs. Francis got up and partially dressed herself, completing her costume for the nonce with a flowing dressing-gown, no longer so fresh and pretty as it once had been. Her soft pale-brown hair hung down about her shoulders. Having gathered together some scraps of paper, and other kindling material, she quickly built up a fire, filling the grate with the remains of the coal in the wooden box that did duty as coal-scuttle. She half-filled the kettle and placed it on the hob, and then moved languidly to the window and looked out, drawing back her hair from her cheek with the small idle fingers of one hand ; the other hand rested apathetically on the sill.

The room was small, and might formerly have been both pretty and comfortable ; but now it had an exhausted and negligent air ; its brightness and orderliness had departed, insomuch that a pure and wholesome mind would have felt oppressed and anxious there. The once-cheerful carpet was neutral-tinted and threadbare now, and the divisions of the boards beneath had printed themselves off upon it. The wall-paper, stamped with a blue figure of not ungraceful design, was torn and stained in several places. The window curtains, of some flowered blue fabric resembling damask, had faded under the action of the light to a dirty yellow hue, except where portions of the trimming, fallen away, disclosed the original colour beneath. At some previous period there had been several pictures on the walls ; but these had been removed, and only oblong squares of darker tint remained to show where they had hung. There was not much furniture in the room—a small table, two or three chairs, an ottoman, a bedstead ; all somewhat defaced and shabby,

but bearing evidence of having been sightly and comfortable enough when new. Altogether, therefore, a sad, pathetic little room which had come upon evil days, and might anticipate worse days still. Its window, moreover, overlooked back yards and a wilderness of hideous brick, and although heaven was visible, if you raised your eyes high enough, the hideous brick had a hideous fascination.

The young woman, at all events, had not raised her eyes, save for one brief glance, which fell again discontented, because the sky was all clouds. After a while she turned away from the window, and walked with a somewhat heavy step to the fire-place, where she sat down. She kept up a constant tattoo and drumming with her fingers ; and she was ever and anon changing the position of her body and limbs, now nervously and impatiently, now with a languid and apathetic weariness. She had a way of pushing the hair quickly back from her face, and then remaining for a minute or two with her face

upturned, revealing the full length and delicacy of the white throat, her hand arrested just beneath the ear. Then hand and face would droop again, and the tattoo would begin once more.

The face, under prosperous circumstances, might have been very pretty. The best that could be said of it now was, that it possessed a certain dim and fitful attractiveness, due more to attitudes, and, so to say, reminiscences, than to any positive significance of feature. With advantages of colour, health, vivacity, and the consciousness of admiration, this countenance was doubtless full of piquant little charms ; but apart from these contingencies, pale, harassed, with darker semicircles beneath the eyes, and a sorrowful relaxation of the corners of a rather large and mobile mouth : few men would have retained any recollection of it a moment after passing it in the street. Except for an unsophisticated element that pervaded it, in the midst of its trouble and lapse, it would have seemed quite trifling and vacant ; but thereby it acquired

pathos, and so was lifted to a higher than its legitimate level of interest. When an incorrigibly childish and mercurial nature falls into evil, the spectacle touches our heart more nearly than does the deeper fall of a mature intellect.

During the interval before the kettle began to come to life, this young woman's mind, which dwelt mainly on the past, and held the future in aversion, was hovering about the event of the previous evening. She had had a visitor; and a visit, although not from the person she most wished to see, was nevertheless a marked episode in a life like hers. To this visit was it owing, indeed, that yonder trunk stood ready packed near the door. He was a kind gentleman, this visitor, and he had told her great news—news which would alter everything for her—if only the news were true. But on that point she had grave doubts: it might possibly be true—but she would almost have preferred an established negative to an affirmative with misgivings. Hers was a character unfitted to endure

suspense. Of course it couldn't be true. Oh, but if it should be true! She would never believe it until she knew it. Yet it would be so sweet to believe it, that, in spite of herself, the sweet belief could not consent to be denied. Besides, how could any one have had the heart to tell her such a thing, if he had not known it was true? And he had looked like a very kind gentleman, and when he had told her of this, he had held her hand softly, and smiled at her with his red lips, and his eyes had glistened benevolently.

But to be married! honestly married! Well, why not? A year ago, had she not looked forward to marriage with confidence? Surely she had a right to be married — a terrible right! No doubt she had done very wrong; but she had suffered for it very much. God had been angry with her; but God, the Bible said, was in the habit of getting angry with people, and sometimes forgiving them again. Could He not forgive a poor girl like her, who had never meant to do Him any harm? Then there was Christ: He was

God, too, in some way—she did not understand how ; but the Bible said He had come into the world on purpose to help poor folks like her. It would not cost Him much trouble to get her married. And then there was the third God—the Comforter, He was called in the Bible—He, like Christ, was always kind, so she might count on having Two of the Three on her side ; and although the angry God was the strongest of the Three, still she was but a poor harmless girl, only asking to be made an honest woman of. Might she not hope they would do it ?

Besides, what wrong had she done ? She had loved some one very much—oh ! with her whole heart and soul. He had said he loved her ; and so she had given herself to him, and had gone away with him to be happy—as she thought. She had loved him so very much—more than anything, more than God, even ; and perhaps that was where the wrong lay. But how could she be expected to love God, whom she had never seen, and who had been angry with her ever

since she was born, better than the man who had seemed to her so noble, kind, and splendid, who had caressed her so tenderly, who had looked and smiled at her, and spoken to her so winningly, whom she had seen and known from her childhood, and who had taken her so utterly to himself that there was nothing left for her to give him ? She could not help loving that man better than God ; but if God would let her be married, then she would thank Him and love Him, though she did not see why He should much care whether a poor creature like her loved Him or not. Her love could not make Him happy, though the lack of it made Him angry.

To be married—to be his wife. He used to call her 'my little wife' at first—a year ago. But really she had hardly cared, then, whether he married her or not : all she had wanted was to love him and to have him love her. It had been all happiness at first. Afterwards, the happiness had been less, though her love had not been so. There had not always been enough money ; he had

been often away from her ; and when, about six months since, she had whispered to him something which she had come to know, and which had made her hot and cold with fear and love and wonder, his face had changed suddenly, he had got up as if displeased, and had walked to the window and stood there for several minutes with his back turned upon her, tapping the floor with his foot, his hands behind him, one griping the wrist of the other so hard that the ends of the fingers whitened. No ; that had not been a happy day.

From that time she had begun to wish that she might be married ; and it was then that she had first been brought to realise that he might never marry her. He had never refused, in so many words, to do so ; but he looked stern when she mentioned it (as she did sometimes, trying to speak lightly and playfully, and not to let the tears come to her eyes), and kept away from her more than ever—it was nine weeks to-day since she had seen him. She had often been very miser-

able : she had wished she were dead : sometimes she had felt reckless and wicked. He might at least have written to her—have answered her letters ! What was to become of her when she was ill ! The landlady had said she must not stay in her house, unless her husband came and stayed with her ; and had added that for all she knew there might be no husband in the case. This was at a time when the rent had been overdue a good while. She had written to him again ; he had sent money, but had not come himself. She would have to go to the hospital then. But day by day the feeling had gained upon her that she would not be alive after that ; and she had pondered over it all, and feared, and doubted, and hesitated, being left all to herself, with no one to give her advice or talk with her ; and at last, like a ray of light, it had come into her mind to write to the good old minister who once had held her in his arms and baptised her, and had asked God's blessing upon her. She would ask only that the little baby, which its mother

might not live to see, should not be left nameless and unknown in the great forlorn hospital. She would not tell who its father was ; but perhaps, for its wicked mother's sake, somebody would care for it.

That letter had been written and posted only three days ago. The same morning she had seen, in the City, a face that she knew—a man who once, in the old days, had asked her to marry him. Poor Prout ! she had not given a very kind answer to that question which he had put so earnestly and so awkwardly, growing red to the tips of his ears, and treading upon the skirt of her new dress : she had laughed at him then ; but she had not suspected that the time would come when she would be ashamed to have him look at her ! On this morning, when she caught sight of him, sitting on the top of a 'bus, she had just posted her letter : she turned the corner of the street at once, and hurried home. Had he followed her ? She could not help fancying that he had ; and, from something the landlady said that afternoon, that he had

made inquiries about her. Thinking about it had made her nervous all the rest of the day ; and she had longed more than ever for an answer to her letter. She would not doubt that an answer would come.

It had come in an unexpected way, in the shape of the red-lipped, moist-eyed gentleman of yesterday evening. He had not told his news at first ; he had asked her various questions, intending, doubtless, to prepare her mind for the surprise in store. At last he said that he was just from Cedarhurst, where he had spoken about her with some friends of hers. Had the minister got her letter ? she asked. He looked hard at her for a moment, pushing out his under lip and wrinkling his forehead ; and then had said, Yes ; that he had come to tell her she was to return to the Vicarage at once ; that all the wrong was to be righted ; that she would meet her husband there. ‘ What do you mean ? ’ she had asked ; and he answered, taking her hand and smiling into her face with his little brown eyes : ‘ Yes, your husband ; as he has long been to all

intents and purposes, and as he now will be legally and religiously. He could not come here to-day to tell you this himself ; so I came in his place. To-morrow you will meet ; I hope you will be happy. He sent you this, with his love,' it was a five-pound note ; 'you are to pay all your debts here, and pack your trunk, and be sure to catch the four o'clock train to-morrow. There will be some one to meet you at the station there.'

All this he had said in his whispering thick-sounding voice, with a smile and a glistening of the eyes between each sentence ; and soon afterwards he went away. In thinking over his visit, she had felt some doubts which, in the hurry and excitement of the moment, had not occurred to her. Who was this gentleman ? What proof had she that he had told the truth ? Why had he given no explanation as to why her husband, as he called him, had been prevented from coming ? These and other questions disturbed her mind while she was packing her trunk, and made her dreams feverish and uneasy. But when, on the other

hand, she had asked herself what motive he could have had to deceive her, and had been able to imagine none, she had gradually become reassured, and almost believed that the end of all her troubles was at hand. She sat for a long time, on this last morning, immersed in restless reverie ; and the kettle had almost boiled itself out before she emerged to a perception of outward things.



CHAPTER XIV.

BEGINNING A LONG JOURNEY.

HE reader, who will long ago have come to the conclusion that she was a very undesirable person, with vague or even scandalous notions on religious and moral subjects, will not care to follow her too closely in her various thoughts and acts during the forenoon of this day. They were not important, merely the paying of sundry small bills, and of the past month's rent ; a prolonged farewell gossip with her landlady, who evinced a rather gratifying curiosity as to whither her lodger might be going ; to which inquiry the lodger replied by shadowing forth

a destiny in comparison with the splendours of which the fortunes of the heroines of the 'Penny Reader' would appear tame. Then there was a lunch to be eaten, whereat, also, the benevolent landlady assisted, and preoccupiedly disposed of the whole of the 'pure unsweetened' which she had counselled her lodger to procure for 'soothin' the nerves.' Finally, there was the four-wheeler to be called, and the trunk, with its imperfect lock, and its supplementary rope fastening that would not keep in place, to be hoisted on top ; and, after all, the long dazing jolt and rattle to the railway-station, and the hurry and bewilderment there.

She had got a first-class ticket, for there was money enough left in her purse, and she wished, if possible, to be alone. She wore her best clothes : a black silk dress, a cloak trimmed with fur, a bonnet and muff to match. She had put on, also, a pair of kid gloves, which she had bought during the morning. Altogether, with her pale, tired, but expectant and still girlish face, her appearance was refined and gently attractive.

Two points, at least, of her former prettiness yet remained to her: the long curving sweep of her eyelashes, and the tender unsophisticated pout of her upper lip, which projected somewhat beyond the thinner lip below. These features lent grace to her profile, as it was relieved against the dark-blue cushion of the railway-carriage. But there was no one there to look at it.

It had begun to snow at noon, and now the air was dense with fine thick-coming flakes driven slantwise by the north wind. The short day was already over, and the storm hastened and increased the gloom of twilight. The lamp in the roof of the carriage was lit, and the traveller could see a phantom picture of the comfortable compartment projected upon the outer darkness, and the likeness of herself seated within it. The monotonous roar in her ears, the swift even motion, the elastic luxury of the cushioned seat, gradually brought about a kind of forgetfulness of her physical self. She felt, for the time being, emancipated from the galling weight of bodily

fetters, and the immaterial part of her was able to stand aloof, so to speak, and contemplate its worldly plight undisturbed. She would call that unsubstantial figure in the storm outside her real self ; and she, sitting here, the unreality.

Would it not be well if this disembodiment were to last for ever ? She was leaving behind her her life of the past year ; why not take leave of life altogether ? Come what might, she could hardly hope to be as happy in the future as she had been in the past. She had had experience ; but it had not taught her why wrong was wrong, or goodness good. She had felt almost everything of pain and pleasure that a girl like her could expect to feel — almost, not quite all ! but what was to come would soon be over. The pleasure would be, to hear him call her wife before them all ; the pain—that she could not forecast. Perhaps it would not be so bad as they said. Everything, just now, seemed unreal, even the past.

The train slackened speed and stopped.

A porter outside called the name of the station—the next station to Cedarhurst. Moved by a sudden impulse the young woman put down the window, opened the door, and got out. She felt the cold wind and the snow upon her face. The porter shut the door, and the train moved on, leaving her standing on the platform.

It had occurred to her that she did not wish to be met by the person who was waiting for her at Cedarhurst, and so be exposed to the looks and remarks of the people there, whom she had known, and who would recognise her. She could escape this by getting out here and proceeding the rest of the way on foot. Cedarhurst Vicarage, whither she was bound, was rather less than a mile distant, on the hither side of Cedarhurst station. She knew a short way of getting there, by a foot-path, and, for some three hundred yards, along the railway itself. She had walked it scores of times as a girl. It would bring her to her destination almost as soon as if she had ridden on to Cedarhurst, and then taken a fly

back to the Vicarage ; and she would enjoy the advantage of arriving quite unseen. As to the drawbacks of the storm and the darkness, she had not thought of them ; still less was she deterred by the remembrance of her own physical unfitness for exertion. All she felt was, by this and by no other way must she go.

She had an umbrella, which she spread before passing the gate, thus screening her face from the scrutiny of the ticket-collector stationed there. A voice asked her whether she would take a cab ? She only shook her head and hurried on. In a few moments she was following the darkened pathway, safe from observation. The strong wind rendered the umbrella so troublesome that at length she determined to do without it : it was only an old one ; she closed it and stuck it beneath the hedge ; then slipped both hands into her muff, bent her head, and quickened her steps.

By-and-by she came to the stile ; after passing which the path crosses the railway

and resumes its course on the other side. She climbed over the stile with difficulty ; she was feeling a good deal exhausted, and the whirl of the snow bewildered her. After getting on the railway, instead of crossing directly over, she must follow down the line till past the curve, and only take the road again when almost at the bridge—in this way saving about a quarter of a mile. Walking on the line was forbidden ; but this was not the first time she had walked in forbidden ways. She struggled along, staggering now and then, and feeling her way rather than seeing it. In fact, her whole mind was so intent upon the meeting which lay a little farther on in the future, that she scarcely gave heed to anything else. She was out of sympathy with her body's exhaustion and distress. It had stumbled and recovered itself : never mind ! she was thinking of how his face would look when she first appeared before him ; of how his lips would move before he spoke ; and of what he would say. Would he call her “ wife ” ?

How the wind roared—how it shrieked, louder and louder! Was it the wind? What was that sudden glare round the curve, causing the glistening rails to flash into visibility, and the blinding snow-flakes to whirl in dazzling rings? What was this devouring, earth-shaking rush? None too soon did she step aside to let that iron-shod, headlong monster hurl past. But her limbs felt as if sheathed with lead, and her heart was as water within her. She knew not which way she was moving, or whether she were moving at all. Some one had shouted to her; she had heard his voice above the rattle of the flying train; there had seemed to be in it a note of familiar sound. But her ears were so stunned she could not be sure; and now that roar and rattle seemed to be approaching again. There was the shout again, too—was the train coming back? But if so, was she not on the other track, and therefore safe? She turned partly round; she saw it come, terrible as before, and still she was in its path. She could not escape this time.

There she stood, lifting her muff so as to cover her eyes; not so much caring if death were there, but yet unwilling to look it in the face. Oh, that roar! It was the worst of all. When would the shock come?



CHAPTER XV.

IN A DREAM.

 HE Reverend Arthur Strome, throughout the morning of this day, had seemed to be in one of his states of angelic communion. A light that was not light, but something of a yet more subtle brightness, rayed forth from every line and eloquent feature of his ardent, guileless face. There was an unusual amount of parish work to attend to; and whatever he found to do or to say was so said and done as to exhale a fragrance of charity and love. Several persons whom he met told him that they had never seen him looking better; and

Doctor Stemper, one of the jolliest and most laughter-loving physicians on record, vowed, with a chuckle and a twinkle, that 'By George, parson, you—you grow younger every day—eh? Ha, ha! I shall find you turning up a boy one of these days—eh? and be called in to doctor you for—for scarlet fever and teething—eh? Ha, ha, ha!'

The minister stopped a moment, his arms hanging down at his sides, and his eyes fixed half smilingly, half musingly upon his friend's face. 'It's surprising how old I am, though,' he said at last, in a measured tone that contrasted with the tripping hurry of the physician's speech. 'I was talking of it with Mary Dene yesterday: I've been married thirty years! I'd be willing to go through it all again, just on the chance of being as happy as I have been. It would be worth the risk!'

The doctor looked comically grave, and heaved a big sigh. 'By George, parson, that's tremendous!' he said, shaking his head. 'Never heard a man say that before—eh? never! I wouldn't—no, I wouldn't! and you'd

think I'd been as happy as most men to hear me laugh ! But go through it all again ? By George, no !—eh ? Not if I know it !

This conversation took place at the door of the dispensary, where the two old friends had paused to exchange parting words, the minister having stepped in to apprise the doctor of the expected arrival of Fanny Jackson. 'I expect Sebastian with her to-night or to-morrow morning,' the minister had said ; 'he will have got Mary Dene's letter before this time. Look in at the Home on your way down, and see that all is in readiness.' This the good doctor had promised to do, but, in his own mind, he had thought it none too probable that Fanny would appear. He fancied he knew more about the ways of women like her than the parson did. 'Wants money,' he had said to himself ; 'wants money—eh ? That's about the size of it !

It was about two o'clock when the minister reached the Vicarage, after the conclusion of his labours. He had arranged to have no occupation that would take him away from

the house this afternoon, in order to be on hand if any message should come about Fanny. He sat in his chair in the little study, with paper before him on which to jot down thoughts for his Christmas sermon. Mrs. Strome was in her seat beside the fire, upright and quiet, sewing on some tiny baby garment. The minister could never write his sermons unless his wife were in the room: not that he ever asked her assistance in composition, but he needed the silent influence of her presence.

On this occasion, however, he did not find himself in the mood to write. Following on the activity and ardour of the morning, a tender and musing gravity had taken possession of him. When he spoke it was in a hushed tone, and always with an indescribable gentleness.

‘I remember once—ever so long ago—reading a theory that when the time of death approaches—while it is yet several hours distant, and without the man being necessarily in expectation of his end—his soul is

already in process of being withdrawn from the body. The angels come to him betimes on his last day; and order it so, that the withdrawal is completed at the moment when what is called the stroke of death falls.'

'I like that theory,' said Mrs. Strome, after duly reflecting upon it. 'I never liked the idea of the soul being torn out of the body at a moment's warning. But what made you think of it to-day, Arthur ?'

'Oh, I'm in a fanciful humour! I feel particularly easy and comfortable—as if there were no more work to be done in the world! How little useful work a man contrives to do in this life! It's well for him that he has eternity to improve in. I have lived a long time, but I've made ducks and drakes of half of it.'

'Of which half, dear?' inquired Mrs. Strome, with an unusual approach to dry humour.

'Not of you, Susie!' rejoined her husband, smiling. 'But I mean the thousand blunders I've made in the way of my calling. Intui-

tions have been my undoing ; there never was anybody so easily convinced as I that he had received a direct revelation of divine truth. The trouble was, that before I found out my mistake, I'd persuaded a hundred innocent folk to follow me into the mire. That is worse than waste of time ; idleness would have seemed safer. There's one comfort, though : I should have done worse but for you !

It was Mrs. Strome's habit, when she heard anything with the purport of which she disagreed, and which yet did not demand opposition from the moral or religious standpoint, to say nothing whatever. And it is to be observed, for the edification of womankind at large, that although Mrs. Strome was a woman of considerable dialectic powers, she seldom succeeded in devising a retort more efficacious than this of silence. As her husband had often told her, it was the only infallible method of getting the last word. On this occasion, accordingly, several minutes were allowed to pass before Mrs. Strome re-

marked, drawing the thread serenely through a stitch :

‘ I wonder whether it will be a boy or a girl ! ’

‘ Non omnis moriar ! ’ murmured the minister, who was also pursuing his independent vein of thought. ‘ The only lasting benefit I shall have bestowed upon mankind is Sebastian ; but he will compensate for a multitude of shortcomings. Poor fellow ! how he must have suffered to-day. I hope there has been no mishap.’

‘ I hope so, too.’

‘ Oh, there’s no danger : he has the *savoir faire* of a Napoleon ! I think I shall step over to the station presently to see whether they arrive by this train.’

‘ Don’t go out this evening, Arthur ! ’ said Mrs. Strome suddenly.

‘ Oh, Susie ! ’

‘ I am sure you had better not. Sebastian will be sure to send word if he wants you to meet him. Very likely he won’t bring her until to-morrow. See what a storm has

come on! Don't go, Arthur! Besides, some important message might come while you were away.'

'That is true,' assented the minister, though reluctantly. 'Well, I will stay then; but it's only ten minutes to the station, Susie, and I think a breath of this snowy air might drive away this lazy fit that has come over me.'

Again the wife entrenched herself in silence; and the husband, after a longing gaze through the darkening window-pane, against which the faint rustle of the falling snow was audible, relapsed into abstraction. Presently, as the gloom increased, Mrs. Strome laid aside her sewing, and came and sat in a low chair beside her husband. He immediately put his arm over her shoulder, so that his hand hung down where hers could clasp it; thus disposed, the two old lovers, in the fitful gleam of the firelight, might have been mistaken for the fiery youth and the pure steadfast girl of thirty years before. Those thirty years had strengthened, instead

of weakened, their marriage bonds. Those years that had seen them grow grey had been to them opportunity, not time. With respect to each other, they were already living in eternity. In this firelight silence, hand-in-hand, they were perhaps more deeply together and more happy than they had ever been before. More could not be asked for them.

‘Which of us will go first, Susie?’ queried the husband at last.

‘God has made us one, and we shall not be parted,’ said the wife’s quiet voice. ‘My love and thought will follow you, Arthur, wherever you go; and what else is there that is me?’

She lifted her face as she spoke, and he bent his towards it. But the room was now almost dark; for the light of Heaven does not reach mortal eyesight.

‘Did you see that?’ exclaimed the minister, with a start.

‘That spurt of flame from the coal?’

The minister passed his hand over his

forehead ; it was moist and cold ; his heart was beating heavily. The vision had vanished.

‘Susie, I must go. Something will happen to that poor child ! I baptised her—there is a bond between us—and an obligation ! I’ll come back !’

He had risen ; Mrs. Strome felt that he was trembling slightly ; her heart sank ; but she encouraged it again. A real crisis seemed to be at hand demanding strength.

‘Shall you go to the station ?’ she asked with cheerfulness. ‘The train will just have arrived.’

‘Yes. It will not be there ; but I shall know !’ He was putting on his cloak and hat, she helping him. ‘I shall bring her here,’ he went on, thinking aloud. ‘What can have become of Sebastian ? I did not see him.’

‘I have put the flask in your pocket,’ said his wife to him at the door. ‘All will be ready when you come back. God be with you, my husband !’

‘And with thy spirit!’ he answered, kissing her, and was off.

Running and walking, he reached the station in but little over five minutes. The train had just gone on. At the door he met Prout. The two men, without need of questions, divined the thought that filled both of them. They sunk the catechism that was only logically necessary, and so arrived immediately at the point.

‘Fanny has not come?’

‘She was to a’ come by this train, sir; but she wasn’t in it when it was here. On’y a box, with “Mrs. Francis” on it. But guard said as a young lady got out of a fust-class at t’other station.’

‘That’s right! so I thought. Now listen, Prout. Get a cab, and drive straight to the bridge—you know. I shall go by the path. When you get there, whistle, and come to me when I answer. Here’s five shillings——’

‘I don’t want it, sir, please. I cared for her myself, ’nd do so still.’

‘Good! then off with you.’

They separated, hurrying away in different directions in the darkness. The minister seemed almost to be acting according to a plan previously foreseen and resolved upon. There was no delay and no doubt. The bridge, where the high-road crossed the railway, was about half a mile distant by the path ; by the road it was farther. The minister ran all the way. His hope was to get there before the passing of the down express and of the up train, which were timed to meet each other at about this point ; but as he ran he heard the whistle of the latter behind him. He quickened his pace ; he and the train arrived at the bridge together. He glanced along the line ; fifty yards farther down, in the glare of the bull's-eye, he caught a glimpse of a woman's black figure. So had he beheld it once before in his vision that evening. He gave a great shout, and sprang down on the steep turf-side of the cutting, plunging forward and downward. She did not see him ; she stood, veiling her eyes.



CHAPTER XVI.

DIVERSION.

THAT has been already mentioned, upon hearsay evidence, that Sebastian Strome was in possession of an income of nearly four hundred pounds, derived from a sum of eight thousand invested in the Four per Cents. As a matter of fact, he did own some money, and it was invested in the manner described ; but the total amount of it had never much exceeded the half of what it was generally believed to be. The bequest had been made about five years before the present date, and for over four years Sebastian had lived very comfortably upon his

modest income. After leaving the university he had travelled on the Continent, and had seen and enjoyed there quite as much as if his worldly resources had been twenty times greater. His was a cool, trenchant, self-contained character, not personally given to dissolute pleasures, but in no way squeamish about observing and associating with those who were, as well as with other people of quite different principles and practice. He carried very good letters of introduction, and could appear in the best society when he chose ; but there was a Bohemian vein in the man which not seldom induced him to absent himself from aristocratic parlours, and appear in places where ladies, at least, were conspicuous by their absence. For that matter, indeed, Sebastian had never shown himself a very ardent admirer of the sex : if he had ever had any boyish love-affair, no one had ever heard of it : and on coming to years of discretion, though always knowing how to make himself agreeable to women, he had never found it necessary to provide means for

fascination by mortgages drawn on his heart. Besides, no sane parents would have countenanced so impecunious a son-in-law, although a son of Arthur Strome, and the nephew of personages still more highly placed in the world's esteem. Though welcome everywhere, therefore, he was still left free to follow his own devices, with no disinterested lady-mothers to warn him against the evils of an irregular mode of life, and artlessly to wean him therefrom by the pure-minded influence of their daughters. Nobody was ever more master of his movements than Sebastian Strome.

All this time he had not decided what profession he would follow, or, indeed, whether he would profess anything in particular. But happening to go to Rome one winter he became acquainted with certain dignitaries of the Church there, and found their conversation so agreeable, and sought their society so diligently, that several persons were ready to swear that he would be a member of the Society of Jesus before the spring. Certain

it is that this experience gave a new turn to his thoughts ; he saw religion from a hitherto unconsidered point of view, and would appear to have discovered in it so much that was in harmony with his taste, that at last he wrote home to his father and mother an intimation that he proposed to follow the former's example in entering the Established Church. Nothing was said in this letter about Romanism ; very likely there was nothing to say. As for Mr. and Mrs. Strome, they rejoiced in the unforced accomplishment of the dearest wish of their hearts. Mr. Strome had never attempted to constrain his son's inclination in respect to the choice of a calling ; and though he had hoped and prayed with his whole soul that Sebastian might become a clergyman, he had too much regard for the latter's liberty of opinion, as well as too high a reverence for the sacred profession itself, ever to have made its adoption by him a question of filial obligation. Sebastian having taken the initiative, however, the father opened his heart, and wrote a letter to the young man full of

such eloquent joy, thanksgiving, and high anticipation, as made him turn pale and clench his teeth in the reading thereof, and often afterwards—in his darker, not in his brighter hours—it recurred with vividness to his memory. For Sebastian Strome stood in almost superstitious awe of his father. He heeded no other man in the world ; but the minister himself was far from suspecting how profoundly he heeded him. Had the aims and natures of the two men been even remotely in accord, (as Mr. Strome believed they were) this strange veneration would have brought about their constant and intimate companionship ; as it was, Sebastian was impelled to keep as much as possible out of his father's way. 'I could never breathe evenly in his atmosphere,' he once admitted ; 'and it used up all the strength I had when he looked at me, just to keep it in mind that I was a man.'

It was not long after the receipt of this letter that Sebastian returned to Cedarhurst, and prepared to begin his course of reading

for the ministry. For some months, however (this was nearly two years previous to his betrothal to Mary Dene), he remained at the Vicarage, apparently in rather an unsettled frame of mind. The period between deciding upon a certain career, and actually entering upon it, is often characterised by restlessness and capricious humour. Sebastian fell into the habit of taking long walks, starting off in the evening and often not getting home till near midnight. His moods were fitful ; sometimes he was uncommunicative and averse from conversation ; at other times he would appear abnormally high-spirited and loquacious. But whenever the vicar tried to draw him out on the subject of his chosen profession, the young man became preoccupied and monosyllabic : evidently he was, for the present, at least, averse from religious and theological conversation. Once, apropos of some remark made by his father about the apostolic succession, he said : 'It is a great risk !' but he did not explain his meaning. Again, he observed one day to his mother

after a long fit of silence : ' I'm glad I was not St. Paul ! ' Nothing could be inferred from such declarations, except that the mind of him who made them might be less composed than his countenance. At another time he said : ' No moralist can be religious ! ' But although these dark sayings occasioned his parents some solicitude, they never inspired them with a moment's misgiving. Their confidence in Sebastian's essential goodness and rectitude was without limits ; their only uncertainty was in what way these qualities were likely to find their best development.

As the time for his removal to London drew near he made occasional visits to the metropolis, ostensibly for the purpose of selecting a convenient lodging ; and also, no doubt, to renew his relations with such of his university and other friends as were living in town. The change seemed to brighten him up ; he became more even-tempered, though not more disposed than before to encourage serious discussion. In fact his tone in referring to the sacred matters which must be sup-

posed to have been mainly occupying his thoughts, had in it an element of cheerful assurance, almost approaching to levity, which might have appeared irreverent coming from anyone else than himself. But Mr. and Mrs. Strome saw in it only that noble self-distrust in the face of divine mysteries which seeks to veil itself under an affectation of confidence. It was the sign of an insight too profound and delicate to venture on outspokenness. By-and-by, after the beatific vision had grown more familiar to his eyes, he would be able to command his tongue to fuller utterance of it.

Meanwhile, the lodgings were fixed upon, the qualified adieux were said, and the future Archbishop of Canterbury entered definitely upon his studies. There is no reason to doubt that all the technical work which the circumstances demanded was by him fully and punctually performed ; for Sebastian was never deficient in mental application, and never found any difficulty in mastering whatever intellectual task might be set before him. His brain was scarcely subject to weariness

or bewilderment ; in fact, its activity was only too great, and, like the demon in the story, it was always returning to demand fresh employment, until it is no wonder if its owner were occasionally in straits to devise occupations for it. The pressure of some such embarrassment, perhaps, was what led him to cast in his lot with the Mulberries—an association which, whatever its other merits, was not exactly calculated to afford a divinity student the most edifying methods of relaxation. In the case of such a man as Sebastian, however, mere conventional restrictions do not apply. He was not a hermit of the dark ages, to sit for days or weeks in motionless and solitary contemplation ; a man's mind must be very vacant or very innocent to enable him to do that. Sebastian found it more agreeable to withdraw his thoughts from inward concerns, and give them a frequent outing ; and thus it was that he became a pillar of the mysterious Mulberry Club, of which so few people knew anything beyond the name ; and, as we have already seen, from the club-room to the Star

Chamber was only a matter of an additional flight of stairs.

Gambling was not altogether a novelty to Sebastian Strome. He had practised it now and then while on the Continent, and always with such good success that it is surprising he did not indulge in it more. But his condition then had been, in certain ways, more independent than was the case now. For various reasons it would be convenient to him to have rather more money at present than formerly. He had incurred obligations—not pecuniary obligations exactly, but what amounted to pretty nearly the same thing—which rendered an increased expenditure almost unavoidable. Of course the renting and furnishing of his rooms had cost him something—too much to leave a very available margin. Gambling, besides being a diversion in itself, seemed to promise him exceptional advantages. In all games requiring skill, memory, and coolness, Strome was hard to beat; and it was chiefly such games that he meant to play. A few pounds

a week in excess of his regular income would be enough for his needs, and he thought he could reasonably depend on making as much as that. As for heavy play, he had no intention of going in for it; and games of mere chance he would shun altogether. Upon the whole, therefore, the outlook was a good one.

But Strome had left out one factor in his calculation; and that was the contingency of great and persistent good fortune. He won so continually and so largely that it became rather awkward; and in self-defence, as it were, he was constrained to give others an opening by suspending his rule as to games of chance. But all was of no avail: he was as obstinately successful at lansquenet as he had been at whist. What was to be done with all this money? After setting aside a hundred pounds, destined for a particular purpose, there was still a great deal remaining: this he neither desired to spend nor put into the bank; there was nothing for it but to go on playing. Since his object now was

to lose, of course it made no difference to him how high the play was. But he could not lose. At length he began seriously to entertain the idea of giving his winnings to the club.

Matters did not come quite to this point, however. One evening he lost heavily. The next day he only held his own; the time following he won a little; then he lost for four days running; and the last day not only disposed of his winnings, but put him eighty or ninety pounds to the bad. In order to make up this deficiency, he played again. It is not necessary to follow the ups and downs any farther; henceforth Strome was a gambler like other gamblers. For a time he kept careful record of debit and credit; but ultimately this was discontinued, and often he could not have told within a hundred or two what amount of money he possessed. He knew that he was spending rather more than formerly; but he thought he could afford it. The general impression in the club was that he was still, upon the whole, a

winner ; and he allowed himself to share this impression without taking much trouble to verify it. So things went on until, on a certain September morning, he awoke to the consciousness that he had barely fifteen hundred pounds left in the world. The ensuing day he went down to Cedarhurst for a week's visit, and to think over his situation. It was during this week that he engaged himself to Mary Dene.

After this he was able to draw a long breath, and snap his fingers at fortune. At first, however, he thought he would leave off gambling ; but a week's abstention was enough to convince him that the time for such a piece of self-denial was past, or had not yet arrived. Besides, his mind was now more than ever in need of the distraction which nothing affords so well as gambling. Under different circumstances, perhaps, his engagement might have proved distraction enough ; but its moral effect upon Sebastian was, from some cause or other, by no means that of a sedative. And there were other

considerations which made it seem desirable that he should try his luck once more. Even with his original four or five thousand pounds intact, he would go empty-handed enough to the heiress of Dene Hall ; but to appear before her with but a third of that small sum would not only be humiliating in itself, but might lead to revelations which were better kept in the background. By recovering what he had lost, he would, therefore, be a gainer in every sense ; whereas, should he lose what remained to him, he would be scarcely worse off than he was at present. The argument was quite as cogent as it had need to be ; so Sebastian shuffled the cards and set to work with fresh vigour.

The story of the three months that followed would be wearisome to recapitulate here. There were no great strokes of either good or bad luck ; but the general tendency was downward. On Monday night of the week in which our history begins Sebastian was actually left with a capital of rather less than one hundred pounds all told. But on Tuesday

night, as has been already intimated, he rose a winner of five hundred, chiefly from Culver. And this brings us to the Wednesday night's work now going on. Previously to coming to the club on this evening, Sebastian had called on various tradesmen, and paid the bulk of the bills which had been for some time overdue. He had over three hundred pounds in his pocket when he sat down to play.

'Let the parson shuffle,' said Ephraim Arch, handing a pack of cards to Strome.

'Well, what is it to be?' he said, taking them. 'Here are six of us.'

'I don't care to play—I'm sleepy,' put in Smillet, smiling and yawning at the same time.

'That won't do; I once heard you snore; you must be kept awake at any cost,' rejoined Arch. 'Gentlemen, in view of the presence among us of Mr. Fawley, I propose that we try faro; or, as the ancients yclept it, Pharaoh; and that I be banker.'

‘Why on my account?’ inquired Fawley, wrinkling his forehead.

‘History tells us that the Egyptian led the Israelite captive, and I fear that at any other game the Israelite might capture us. He owes me five pounds.’

‘Which he hereby returns with thanks,’ said Fawley, taking a note from his pocket and handing it to Arch very good-naturedly.

‘Accept my acknowledgments; I withdraw my motion, and anybody may propose what he pleases. What say you, Jasper Grannit, Esquire?’

Grannit, who had just placed his snuff-box on the table beside him, merely shrugged his shoulders politely, and leant back dreamily in his chair.

‘Why not piquet?’ said Strome.

‘Oh, I daresay!’ cried Culver with an injured air. ‘Nobody here knows the game except you. Let’s play lansquenet.’

‘I used to fancy that I knew something of piquet,’ remarked Fawley modestly.

Strome looked at him, and their glances

met for an instant. Strome said, 'Does anybody else speak for piquet?' But no one else spoke, until Smillet piped out:

'Come, I say, why not call it lansquenet, and have done with it? I'm too sleepy to play any other game, and anybody that wants piquet can play it afterwards.'

'Lansquenet, lansquenet!' echoed Culver; and in the end this was the game decided on, and Strome had the first deal. He won his first stake, and passed the deal to Arch, who sat next him. Arch deposited his newly-acquired five-pound note, and being successful in his first deal, went on. Culver, who was his left-hand neighbour, covered the stake on the ensuing occasion, Arch winning again, and then passed the pack, observing that this was almost as good as Pharaoh. Culver, who, as far as deportment went, could hardly be deemed the ideal of a gambler, gnawed his fingers, shuffled his feet, and sputtered inarticulately; but ended, as usual, by thrusting his hands impulsively into his pockets for more money. Thus the

game went on, steadily and uneventfully, for nearly two hours, everybody winning a little in turn except Culver; and when two o'clock struck, Smillet, who had been kept from sleep only by main force, had accumulated a small fortune of a hundred and ten pounds—a sum exceeding all the rest of the money then on the table. At this point, however, he flatly refused to play any longer; and pushing his winnings over to Strome, with directions to 'lose it,' he got up from the table, groped his way to a sofa, and lay down. The others closed up, and the play continued.

When it came to Strome's deal, he began by staking Smillet's money, and in four successive deals he doubled it, and put the joint sum in a pocket apart from his proper possessions. In the next deal Grannit lost a small amount, and so it went slowly round again. At the end of two hours more Strome headed the list with two hundred pounds, nearly half of which had come out of the pocket of the unlucky Culver. Arch, who was reduced to his original five pounds,

prudently declared that he had had enough of it, and bidding the company good-night, he retired. Thus only four of the original six were left.

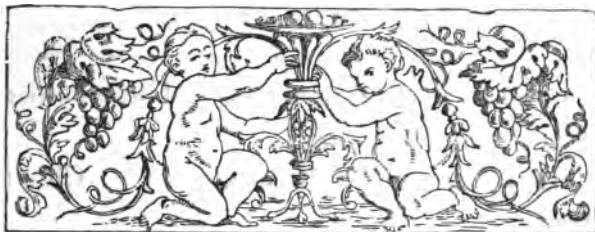
The room was now very quiet ; there were no sounds except the vigorous snoring of Smillet from the sofa, the occasional brief murmurs of the players, the flip and shuffle of the cards, the chink of sovereigns, and the rustle of bank-notes. Culver was evidently the most exhausted of the four, in body as well as in purse ; he had lit a long black cigar, but seemed to find little consolation in it. Grannit once in a while courteously veiled a yawn behind his white hand, and apparently felt less interest in the game than any of the others, which was not surprising, seeing that he had neither won nor lost very heavily. Strome and Fawley, however, were comparatively fresh ; and as time went on, it looked as if the main contest would be between them.

All of a sudden, however, a duel began in which Grannit and Culver were the antagonists. The cards being with the former,

Culver staked against him, and went on staking and losing no less than five times in succession. Culver risked a sixth stake and lost again ; and Grannit, instead of giving him another chance, serenely drew in his winnings and surrendered the pack. This blow finished Culver, who had certainly contrived to draw upon himself three-fourths of the losses of the night. It was now half-past five o'clock.

Only three players renders lansquenet a lively game, and it so happened that Grannit, Strome, and Fawley seemed one and all to have been waiting for this opportunity of trying one another's strength. Grannit, for the first time during the night, appeared thoroughly awake ; he was as bright and vivacious as his principles ever permitted him to be. He was, moreover, the most practised gambler of the three. How large his monetary resources might be it was impossible to guess ; he was never at a loss for a stake, and whether he won or failed to win, he was equally suave and undemonstrative. Strome

was graver and more earnest than he, but not less impenetrable. As for Fawley, although, as afterwards transpired, he had more money about him than either of the others, he betrayed the greater anxiety and excitement. His small glistening eyes followed the turn of the cards with an intensity of inspection that seemed striving to palpably influence them. An onlooker, had there been one, might have remarked that Fawley and Strome never cared to contend much against Grannit, but reserved all their energies for each other. In fact, between these two it was battle à outrance, and defeat, on whichever side it should fall, would signify something more than pecuniary disaster. The stakes had by this time become perilously heavy. The fire had gone out long since, but none of the players were sensible of cold. None of them knew that Smillet was still snoring upon the sofa. They were aware of nothing save the gaudily-painted cards, the green table, and the money. They had forgotten everything else: by-and-by they almost forgot one another.



CHAPTER XVII.

PIQUET.

 MILLET reluctantly awoke, with a sense of being shaken. He unclosed his eyes, and was obscurely aware that some one—his valet, probably—was standing over him and speaking to him with a voice that sounded curiously like Strome's. He felt cold, and not over comfortable. Was he in bed at all? Why, this was Strome himself! How did he get there? There was a ghastly light of early morning in the room—not his room—what room, then?

‘Oh, I say, what’s the matter?’

‘Get up! It’s after eight o’clock. Come

down and get some breakfast. There's a fire downstairs. Wake up !

‘Downstairs ? Where are we ? Club ? How— By Jove !’

‘Wake up, Thomas—up with you ! We have smitten the Israelite hip and thigh ! Breakfast ! Coffee, chops, champagne ! Victory ! Wake up !’

‘I say, Strome, how you do go on ! Ah-h-h— oh, let me have my yawn out ! How pale you look ! Where are the other fellows ?’

‘At breakfast—what's left of them.’

‘You haven't been playing all night ? Who won ?’

‘Sit up, and I'll show you. Look here—and here. Three thousand—four thousand—four thousand five hundred. I won !’

‘I should think so ! Who lost it ?’

‘Mr. Selim Fawley, the friend of my youth is the loser,’ replied Strome, returning the notes to his pocket with a curious smile. ‘The wonder is, how he happened to have so much about him. Grannit left off within

twenty pounds of where he started, though he was ahead of both of us at one time. It was between the Jew and me. Thomas, this is the happiest day of my life. He was delivered into my hands. I wouldn't have won it from any other man living. I'd have staked my salvation to win it from the friend of my youth, and probably that's the reason I did win it. One may take liberties with one's friends, you know.'

'Strome, how you do go on! I never saw you so worked up before. You're as white as milk!'

'I'm hungry, Thomas—famished! Come down. Chops and coffee. I wish you'd been awake to see his visage when he put down the last stake, and I pocketed it. Ha, ha! I could have fallen on his neck and embraced him!'

'I believe I smell those chops! By Jove! that makes me feel hungry too,' said Smillet, turning up his broad nostrils and sniffing. 'This leg's asleep still; give me your arm. My idea is, you should give up gambling and

that sort of thing, or else cut the Church, as I did. Fancy sitting up all night too! Come along!"

They went downstairs arm-in-arm; and Smillet, had he not been preoccupied by the aroma of the chops, might have felt Strome's arm tremble under his, either from cold, fatigue, or excitement. It was true that this stoic had lost the better part of his stoicism for the time being. He was instinct with a sense of personal triumph and invincibility that seemed to lift him above human limitations. What should prevail against him? He lifted his head, and looked about him like a god; but he could not keep his hands and voice from vibrating a little, and scarcely commanded his speech to sober expressions.

In the room below the indefatigable Ashe had set out an enticing breakfast-table in a snug corner, with snow-white cloth, glistening covers, and smoking coffee-pot. The two seated themselves, and Smillet set to work upon the viands without delay. Strome, notwithstanding what he had said about his appe-

tite, only swallowed a cup or two of black coffee, and crunched a few slips of dry toast. His triumph fed him. He kept glancing over towards the opposite end of the room, where Fawley and Grannit were busy at another table, and conversing in an undertone. Presently the latter turned, and called across :

‘Good-morning, Mr. Smillet ! You lost a great deal by retiring so early.’

‘Not so much as if I’d kept awake !’ returned Smillet ; and laughed with ingenuous delight at the wit of the repartee. ‘I don’t see how you fellows can stand keeping it up all night that way. I say, Fawley,’ he continued, fixing his eyeglass, ‘I’m awfully sorry for you—everybody must be !’

‘The fortune of war,’ returned Fawley, raising and letting fall his hands, and smiling by a lifting of the upper lip. He got up, immediately after speaking, and sauntered across to the table at which Strome and Smillet were seated. He was evidently on his mettle—trying to appear as if the loss of

more than four thousand pounds were not a matter to overthrow one's equanimity. The annals of the Mulberry Club scarcely contained the tradition of so large a sum being dissipated in a single night's play; a few hundreds was, as a rule, the outside limit. But the contest between Strome and Fawley had been no ordinary one. They had both meant mischief from the beginning, and now the mischief, such as it was, had been done and suffered pretty effectually.

Fawley, though looking somewhat haggard, was yet not so exhausted as might have been expected; his constitution was naturally sound, and he had just been aiding its operation by a pint of dry champagne. He paused in front of the table, rolling a cigarette, and moistening his lips with his tongue.

'I wonder you never tried the bank at Homburg, Strome,' he said; 'you'd be sure to break it. You have such superb luck in games of chance.'

'Chance is chance. I generally play lansquenet to lose the surplus I win at whist and

piquet,' answered Strome, fixing his black eye on the other and smiling.

'Ah, there's nothing like piquet to win money—except lansquenet,' added Fawley, laughing with comic ruefulness. 'A man who really understands piquet can make about what he pleases.'

'So you imagine you understand piquet, do you?' Strome said.

'So well that I'm rather shy of playing it as a general thing. However, I don't mean to be boastful.'

'It's a pity we couldn't have tried a hand or two last night; I should have been glad of a lesson from a master of the art, and it might have lightened me of some part of this embarrassment of riches. Another time let us hope——'

'By Jove!' exclaimed Fawley suddenly. He had been feeling in all his pockets ostensibly for a match; but now he produced a roll of crisp white paper, which he unfolded. 'By Jove! . Fancy that! Here's a couple of hundred that I'd forgotten all about. A brand saved from the burning!'

‘What’s the matter now? Haven’t you had enough of it yet, Mr. Fawley?’ inquired Jasper Grannit, approaching leisurely with his hands in his pockets.

‘Oh, see here!’ piped Smillet, looking up from the stirring of his third cup of coffee with indignant nostrils; ‘no more talk about card-playing, gentlemen, if you please. I won’t countenance it — upon my word I won’t!’

‘Calm yourself, Thomas,’ said Strome, leaning back in his chair and smiling. ‘Mr. Fawley hasn’t asked for his revenge yet. Perhaps his skill at piquet needs a night’s sleep to put it in repair.’

‘You would be the bolder man of the two, Mr. Strome, if you’ll allow me to say so,’ observed Grannit in his low voice. ‘Luck would cease to deserve its name if it continued to smile on you after your last night’s exploits. I wouldn’t tempt it in your place.’

‘There’s a difference between luck at piquet and luck at lansquenet—as Fawley seems to be aware,’ was Strome’s rejoinder.

‘I’ll play you for the rest, if you like!’ Fawley said abruptly, with the air of being egged on to make the challenge. ‘But, I tell you, I’m a better hand at the game than you seem to think. It’s just as you like.’

‘Come home and go to bed, Strome!’ interposed Smillet, wiping his mouth and starting up from the table. ‘You don’t know what you’re about!’

Strome also arose, and a little colour came into his pallid face as he said: ‘If a couple of hours will be of any use to you, Fawley, I am at your mercy for so long.’

‘Just as you like!’ Fawley said again, tossing away his unlighted cigarette.

‘Good-bye, then; I shall follow Mr. Smillet’s suggestion, and take a nap,’ remarked Grannit, sauntering leisurely off again. ‘I can’t say good luck to you—it would sound invidious. But may the issue be satisfactory. Ashe, bring me my coat.’

‘Well,’ declared Smillet in his most emphatic treble, ‘if you two fellows are resolved on making fools of yourselves, I shall just

stay here till you've done. And it would serve you right if you were both to lose all you've got—it would, upon my word !' And with loud sniffs of disapproval, the little man stalked over to the fireplace, and stood there indignantly warming his coat-tails, with his head in the air. Strome looked at him for a moment, as if inclined to say something ; then apparently thinking better of it, he turned off with a half smile and a sideways movement of the head, and disappeared through the doorway leading upstairs to the Star Chamber. Fawley had gone on before ; and then Smillet was left to himself. ' It's too bad !' he murmured, addressing the portrait of Betterton on the opposite wall. ' It's disgraceful !'

' Are you going ?' inquired Grannit, looking in at the door, muffled up in his overcoat.

' I shall wait for Strome.'

' You seem to be—that is, he seems to be a protégé of yours ?'

' It's too bad—I declare it is !' reiterated Smillet aggrievedly.

‘It strikes me the other way. Mr. Strome is embarrassed at having won so much, and wishes to be relieved of it. He couldn’t have chosen a better method: Fawley is the best hand at piquet I ever saw.’

‘Then you’ve seen Fawley before?’

‘Hum! I met him on the Continent.’

‘Well, if he can beat Strome, I’m going to wait and hear about it!’ rejoined Smillet, fetching up his eyeglass with emphasis; and Grannit, after pausing a moment, smiled a little, nodded his head, and withdrew.

For an hour at least, Smillet had the club-room quite to himself: he spent most of the time in moving about restlessly, inspecting the prints on the wall with abstracted gaze, and ever and anon breaking out into brief half-articulate monologues. Towards ten o’clock one or two members dropped in; others followed. Smillet kept himself aloof, affecting to be absorbed in a newspaper. At half-past eleven, however, there was a step in the room that he knew; he put down his paper and came forward. Strome met him

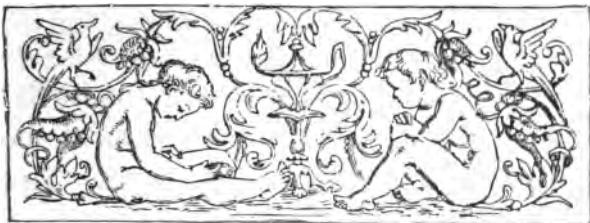
with a bright, alert look, and slipping an arm under his, drew him on to the anteroom, where he began to put on his coat and muffler. 'I want you to come home with me,' he said.

'Where's Fawley?' Smillet demanded, intently eyeing his friend.

'Get on your things, Thomas—upstairs, I suppose!'

'Strome, how much money have you got?'

Strome laughed, and turned away. 'I hardly know,' he said. 'When we get to my rooms we'll count it up. Come along!' And they descended the stairs together.



CHAPTER XVIII.

DISCUSSIONS.

T was snowing when Strome and Smillet emerged from the Mulberry Club, and set their faces towards the Strand. Strome walked fast, causing his short-legged companion to exert himself to the utmost to keep up with him. There were several questions which Smillet was anxious to ask, but his attempts to do so were for the present unavailing. His voice, never very powerful, was now deprived of what strength it ordinarily had by lack of breath ; and even when he contrived to chirp out a sentence or two, Strome, the lower part

of whose face was wrapped up in his muffler, either seemed not to hear, or answered only by a smile and a shake of the head. Thus it happened that, during all the inclement journey from the club to Strome's lodgings, the solicitude of Smillet remained unpeased.

Mrs. Blister, the widow who looked after Strome's home interests, and was sincerely devoted thereto, had had the forethought to build up a comfortable fire against his return. She was not unaccustomed to his remaining away all night, but though she was a lady of rather a religious turn of mind, she never appeared to doubt that his absences were in some good and holy cause. As an embryo clergyman, no less than as a pleasant-spoken and gentlemanly young man, she always approached him in a reverent, if not devotional attitude, and cited him to her acquaintance as an example of unworldliness and virtue. She was a neat, noiseless, half-blind little woman, with a soft caressing voice that lingered and hesitated over the sibilants. She had begun life as lady's-maid in a

nobleman's family ; and perhaps it was during the hours daily spent in combing and brushing her mistress's hair, that she acquired this soothing habit of speech—a species of refinement on the hissing of an ostler. Such, at any rate, was Strome's theory on the subject.

'Sit down, Thomas !' exclaimed the host heartily, as he ushered his guest into the room. ' Dilate yourself upon that sofa, while I summon the nectar and ambrosia from the cupboard. A drop of cognac wouldn't be a bad idea on an occasion like this. *Nunc est bibendum !*

Strome was in one of his fantastic humours. He stepped briskly about, humming to himself, and paying no attention to his guest's remarks. His face had regained its normal colour, and he no longer showed the need of sleep. He still appeared excited, but his excitement was of a different kind from that of the early morning. It did not seek relief in outbreaks of exultation, and there was no tremor in it. The brandy having been put

between them on the table, he drank off a small glass of it to Smillet's good health ; then threw himself back in his chair, folded his arms, and stretched out his legs.

'I should think you'd be hungry,' remarked Smillet.

'I dare say Mrs. Blister will think the same, Thomas ; and presently you will see her appear, and after a prolonged apology for her intrusion, entreat to know whether I wouldn't perhaps like to take a little s-something to eat—anything I would name she would be s-so pleased to procure for me. Admirable woman, Mrs. Blister : I believe the wisest thing I could do, after all, would be to marry her, retire from this trivial and deceitful world, and spend the remainder of my existence cosily in her chimney corner. I should be well taken care of. Ha, ha ! Why don't you say, "Strome, how you do go on" ?'

As Smillet made no rejoinder, the other continued : 'Yes ; I feel that my liberty is in danger—that the widow will have me sooner

or later unless I escape, and so—so I have decided to leave her, Thomas; to give up my rooms, dispose of my furniture, and go elsewhere. What do you think of that plan ?

‘ Go to Dene Hall, I suppose you mean ?

‘ You are too matter-of-fact, Thomas, you’re always for clipping the wings of my imagination. Now I had imagined myself going to Rome, and entering the College of Jesuits, and becoming the confidential friend and adviser of His Holiness Pio Nono. Did you ever meet that sublime old gentleman ?

‘ Any one would think you were a Jesuit already to hear you talk, upon my word they would !’ exclaimed Smillet with indignant plaintiveness. ‘ I never saw the Pope, and I don’t want to see him. I think your father is a much more sublime old gentleman than he is.’

Strome clenched his teeth, and his voice changed. ‘ Do me the favour not to allude to my father again to-day, or to-morrow either, if I should happen to see you to-morrow. I don’t want his name dragged

into whatever nonsense I choose to talk with fools: I wish you to keep that in mind, Smillet, if you please !

Smillet arose manifestly hurt. 'I don't think you've any right to speak that way to a fellow,' he said. 'I'll go, if you like. Of course I know that you're a great deal more of a man than I am, but that doesn't give you a right to insult a fellow. Of course I couldn't mean any disrespect to your father—you know that !'

'I beg your pardon, Smillet! I hope you won't go! I don't want to be alone to-day!' Strome said, putting unusual emphasis on each sentence. 'A man who has been up all night is never quite himself, you know. Only, when I feel—as I generally do feel—I don't like to be reminded of him, that's all!'

Smillet did not possess the faculty of bearing malice; he was not of sufficient consequence in his own eyes. He, therefore, before Strome had finished speaking, not only forgot that he had been insulted, but was sensible of nothing save concern for his

friend. He stood hesitatingly in front of him, fumbling with his eyeglass.

‘Can I do anything, old ‘fellow?’ he asked. ‘Is anything wrong, I mean? I’ve felt as if there was, all the morning. Did Fawley——’

‘Fawley, indeed! Ha, ha! Fawley did his best, you may be sure; but I hope my Thomas doesn’t imagine that Fawley can play piquet as well as I can! Majora canamus. I was talking about becoming a Jesuit.’

‘Oh, bother the Jesuits!’ exclaimed Smillet, resuming his seat.

‘I wouldn’t advise you to attempt it! I’ll preach you a sermon about them. They are the only body of men who have ever realised the true uses of religion. It is the means by which wise men acquire dominion over fools. Men are governed through their fears, physical or metaphysical. But physical fear postulates superior strength in whomsoever inspires it; now it is evident that one man cannot be stronger than two or three other men at

the utmost. But one man armed with metaphysical terrors can frighten the life out of whole nations, with kings and emperors at their head.'

'That's not Christianity, though,' objected Smillet. 'Christianity says that men are to be ruled by love.'

'Perhaps they are to be; but not while you and I are alive, Thomas. Besides, men's affections are fickle, but their poltroonery is constant. Furthermore, as I should wish to be the ruler, I am more concerned about him than about the other fellows. Now the pleasure of ruling by fear can never become insipid; it gratifies my self-esteem, and I am continually amused at seeing what lengths of folly the fools will go; whereas nothing palls on one so quickly as being loved—assuming, for argument's sake, that anybody ever loved anybody except himself.'

'Pooh! it isn't so at all, and you know it!' squeaked the hearer stoutly.

'Power—absolute power! and endless intellectual entertainment. Gratification of the

senses, too—what is there so beautiful, for instance, as the rich elaborate Catholic ritual? I tell you, Thomas, that civilisation has invented nothing so complete and satisfactory as this Church of Rome; nothing so flattering to the higher instincts of a man's mind; nothing even so stimulating and alluring to his lower instincts, if he chooses to indulge them. And of that Church Jesuitism is the flower. I feel that I was fore-ordained to be the chief of the order!

'Anybody would think you were living two hundred years ago! Jesuits don't amount to anything nowadays!'

'The more reason why I should restore them to their ancient pre-eminence. The grand principle remains; it needs only to be adapted to new conditions. Mankind are just as silly and just as cowardly now as they were in Loyola's time: they must be scared with a differently-dressed bogey, that's all. I shall know how to manage. I shall begin with converting the Established Church—or rather with making them admit that they were

converted long ago. Then I will be the Richelieu of England !

As Strome spoke thus, grasping the arms of his chair with his hands, his shoulders thrown back and his head lifted, he looked brilliant and ardent, and not like a materialist. Smillet, in his moderate way, felt—not for the first time, nor for the fiftieth—that his friend was possessed of great powers and talents ; but he also had a perception of the weak place in his armour, and with his usual blunt acuteness he put his finger directly upon it.

‘ You’d better begin with converting yourself, I should think ! You don’t really believe a bit of all that stuff ; and I never saw you in earnest about anything—unless it were about winning Fawley’s money. You were savage on that point.’

‘ Well,’ said the other laughingly, ‘ it has always been a set-to between the Jew and me, ever since I first found him out. But there’s something in that remark of yours. It’s difficult to feel much in earnest about

anything except one's enmities. The surest way to succeed in the world is to be at war with it.'

'Oh, come, you'd better say outright that you don't believe there's such a thing as a good man in existence: I would if I were you!' exclaimed Smillet, expanding his nostrils with a very palpable sneer.

Strome laughed again at first, but his face soon became grave. 'No, I won't gratify you so far as that!' he said presently. 'I do know one good man—what you mean by good. If the Established Church were made up of such men as he, then such men as I would be put to shame—and to our wits' end. I don't reverence what he reverences, but I reverence him. I can't catechise him or account for him. The more he believes in me and rejoices in me, the more he makes me feel what a flimsy scamp I am. I stand in awe of that simple old saint. He wouldn't be a bishop. If he were to stand up in the pulpit of one of our gorgeous high churches, I have a notion that all

the gold, and silver, and colours, and embroidery, and tapers, and intoning, would appear as dust and ashes and senseless gibberish. Ah, Thomas Smillet, I tell you the thought of him has often spoilt my fun. If I thought there were many like him in the world, I should lose my self-confidence and give up. I shall never feel comfortable so long as he is alive. Strange freak of destiny that this man—of all men in the world—should be the father of me!"

"Since it has become allowable to mention him, do you mean that you want him out of the way so that you may be comfortable?"

Strome turned and looked at his companion with something of admiration in his gaze. "You deserve another nip of brandy for that question!" said he at length. "It's a flight of sardonic humour that nobody but you would have thought of. I confess I never happened to look at the matter in that light before. Humph! no. I don't profess philanthropy, Thomas, and yet I love my kind so well that to give them the benefit of his society for

another week, say, I'd be only too happy to sign a receipt for the thirty or forty more years that may still be owing to me. However, this is all talk and affectation, and you are quite justified, my dear mentor, in manifesting your contempt and incredulity.' He was silent a few moments, and then, with an uneasy movement, straightened himself in his chair and poured some brandy into his glass. 'Confound that suggestion of yours —it was infernal! it has made me feel cold!' he murmured, drinking the liquor with a shudder. 'He is well—in perfect health: he will last for five-and-twenty years more at least. Bah! if I were superstitious, now— Well, I am superstitious! "Want him out of the way!" In all my ministerial career, Smillet, I shall never preach a sermon so short and so effective as that. I wish you'd kept it behind your teeth!'

'Why, it was you suggested it, you know,' said Smillet, yawning amiably. 'I didn't mean anything by it. Of course I was only in fun!'

Strome made no rejoinder, but settled down into a heavy silence, from which no efforts of his companion sufficed to arouse him ; and Smillet, after having with difficulty elicited some half-dozen monosyllabic replies, most of them inapt, subsided into taciturnity himself ; and insomuch as, with him, not to speak was nearly the same as not to think, it came about that within half an hour Smillet was sound asleep, and snoring with as much soundness as if it had been his first indulgence of the kind that day.

When Strome's ears were saluted with this not unfamiliar sound, he inhaled and emitted a long breath, and insensibly adopted a more relaxed posture. He had not wished to be alone, but he was glad, nevertheless, that the conscious presence of his friend was for a time removed from him. He had all his life been subject to fits of depression, which did not ordinarily last long, but which were none the less deep while they did last. During the past night and morning he had undergone strong excitement, and it was no more

than natural that he should now feel a reaction therefrom. There were many things for him to think about, and very few—perhaps none—that could afford him pleasure in the thinking. Nor was the mere thinking the worst part; he would have to act and to suffer, and that speedily. It was a gloomy outlook. For the moment, he doubted whether it were worth his while to fight through it. He had already fought vigorously enough, and had been worsted at all points save one; and even as regarded that one, it might turn out that it would have been better had he been defeated too. Or suppose luck were to change, and he were to become as successful as he was now the reverse, what substantial good would that do him? It would not bring him content, nor repose. He must enter the lists again, if only for the sake of distraction. And so it must go on till the end. How far off was that end? Why not say it should be now? Was the highest gratification that life had thus afforded him to be weighed against

its disappointments? By no means! Well, then—

‘Come, come, this is mere affectation!’ said Strome to himself, folding his arms. ‘I don’t really mean to commit suicide. Besides, it would be too tame an ending; and out of character, too—out of the character that I have played before the world. I should be laughed at; and I couldn’t kill myself dead enough not to hear that laughter! Would anybody be sorry? Let me see. Smillet, here, would be surprised to find how little sorry he was able to be. Mary?—humph! not so sorry as the other woman; she would be more angry than sorry, I fancy. My mother would be shocked and indignant. She doesn’t love anybody but her husband; she thinks she loves me, but it is not really me, it is her son, an imaginary creature, not Sebastian Strome! The news that Sebastian Strome had cut his throat might break her heart; but it would break rather through mortification at having been so grossly deceived in him, than at the thought that,

being what he was, she would never see him again. My father—yes, it would break his heart too. But there would be no credit to me in that. He knows me less than any of them. After all, then, there is only one creature living who both knows me and loves me—for I believe she does love me, the anonymous letter to the contrary notwithstanding—and she has the best reason to hate me ; besides which, she bores me, and is very much in my way. What a position to be placed in ! And there's no way out of it—at least, none that I have the pluck to take. Of course, I might take the next train down to Cedarhurst, and say : “Here I am, a new prodigal ! I am not a saint and a gentleman, but a gambler, a liar, and a scamp ; and a beggar into the bargain !” That would be dramatic and decisive enough ; but nothing is so certain as that I shall never do it. Nor shall I commit suicide. Humph ! this is dull work. I think I'll take a leaf out of Smillet's book, and have a nap !

Strome possessed the useful faculty of

going to sleep at a few minutes' notice, under what would ordinarily be deemed unfavourable circumstances. It was by virtue of this power that he was enabled to sustain an amount of physical and mental strain that would have broken down most people. Accordingly, all he found it necessary to do now was to draw up a supplementary chair for the support of his legs, to let his head recline against the cushion, and resolutely to hold thought in check during half a hundred breaths. After that he slept peacefully.



CHAPTER XIX.

NEWS.



MRS. BLISTER, shortly before the time of Strome's return with his friend, had stepped round to a neighbouring street to have a chat with a female crony, who kept a strictly well-behaved little cook-shop, with a back-parlour in which it was sometimes possible for particular friends to obtain eleemosynary thimblefuls of gin, with a scrap of cake thrown in for the sake of additional respectability. Mrs. Bartlet, the crony aforesaid, resembled Mrs. Blister so far as widowhood was concerned ; but was in most other respects that good lady's foil. Thus, while Mrs. Blister

weighed seven stone nine, Mrs. Bartlet, who was barely half an inch taller than her friend, turned the scale at eleven stone thirteen, or twelve four with her Hindja shawl on, as she was fond of remarking. While Mrs. Blister was partially blind, the mistress of the cook-shop possessed (and knew how to use) a pair of exceedingly sharp and sparkling little black eyes, which were quite in harmony with a pungent and intrepid tongue, and a shrewd capacity for business. Mrs. Blister, again, had a natural tendency to contemplate life from the Exeter Hall standpoint; but Mrs. Bartlet was of rather a sceptical and independent turn of mind, accustomed to trust to her own wits and resources, and by no means prone to confide overmuch in those of other people. To make an end of this comparison, Mrs. Bartlet, though she had been left by her husband with no better support than three hungry children and thirty pounds' worth of debts, had worked her way up to redundant solvency and adequate social consideration; while Mrs. Blister, the relict of a hard-

working and fairly successful house-builder, had long since buried the only child she ever possessed, and being of a meek and molluscous temper, had not only failed to increase her banking account, but by dint of imprudent investments and ill-advised expenditures, had contrived insensibly to 'take the hair off' what she had. Upon the whole, therefore, as will readily be understood, there was no obstacle to a fast friendship between her and Mrs. Bartlet, since the interests of the two could nowhere come into collision, and Mrs. Blister was as disposed to listen to advice and information as Mrs. Bartlet was to administer them.

'Ah, Mrs. Blister, and how do you find yourself this cold weather?' inquired Mrs. Bartlet's brisk voice, as her friend's groping figure appeared in the little shop. 'Dick, take those tarts round to fifty-nine, and be back in four minutes, or I'll know the reason why. Step inside here, Mrs. Blister, and I'll find a drop of something comfortin' to give you. You look to need it.'

'You're always s-so hospitable,' replied Mrs. Blister, gratefully availing herself of the invitation. 'I didn't come to s-stop ; only I'd like to take one of your nice tea-cakes home with me, jus-st in case Mr. S-strome was to come home hungry.'

One or two customers entering at this juncture, the hostess was prevented from making an immediate reply to her guest's proposition, although she so far took note of it as to put a cake of the required description aside ; business being business, even among friends, and Mrs. Blister's recollection of her own orders sometimes proving short, especially after a glass or two of Mrs. Bartlet's unsweetened gin. As soon as the customers left her at liberty, she bustled into the little parlour, and after the production of the favourite bottle, took up the conversation where it had been interrupted.

'So he comes home 'untry, Mr. Strome, does he ? I'd been thinking as a rule gentlemen lunched at their clubs.'

'He's so often obliged to be out all night,'

Mrs. Blister explained ; ' and half the time he'd never think to eat anything if s-some one didn't look after him.'

' Ah, obliged to be out all night, is he ?' said Mrs. Bartlet, wiping her lips on the corner of her apron, and then placing her plump red hands upon her well-padded hips. ' I should say likely he would need some one to look after him, Mrs. Blister, as you observe !' and the woman of business inclined her head to one side, and stared meaningly at her friend with her sharp black eyes.

' Only to give him something to eat,' the latter explained again, with meek insistance. ' He's a very nice quiet gentleman, is Mr. S-strome, I'm sure. I'm glad to have him, and nobody could ask for a better lodger. He's to enter the s-sacred calling.'

' Well, sacred is as sacred does, that's my mind ; and no slight to you intended, ma'am,' was Mrs. Bartlet's reply. ' For what I see we've got pretty nigh parsons enough. More parsons than money to pay 'em with, I've 'eard tell. And I expect there's many

goes into it bein', so to say, forced than as choosing it hindependent. It's harmy or Church with them gentlemen's sons that has no fortunes ; go into trade they can't, for fear of dirtyin' their 'ands. But it's not what a man does, but the way he does it, that dirties his 'ands—that's my mind, Mrs. Blister. I say nothin' against the clergy, ma'am—quite hopposite to it ; but if their callin's the 'ighest, fewer there'll be to it fitted. I judge no man, nor woman neither ; I've seen too much of trials, and the hiron has may be entered my soul as much as another's. But when I see a man in the pulpit with no better call to it than bein' a gentleman's son, I calls him a pickpocket of the Lord, and may I be forgiven if I'm wrong. I know you've got more religion in ten minutes, Mrs. Blister, than I could tot up in a year—to my shame be it ! But I've 'eard tell of money-changing in the Temple, and that's what I see goin' on in this blessed Hengland, week in, week out. If a dozen out of all them parsons is worth their salt, I'm glad to hear it, Mrs. Blister,

and say no more than that. Your Mr. Strome may be one on 'em ; I don't say the hopposite, though staying out all night, as you say he do, may seem a queer way to prove it. Drat that boy Dick ! when will he be back from carryin' them tarts, I wonder ? Ah, it's not always we as trades fair and square across the counter as has the dirty hands, Mrs. Blister ; it's them as trades across the pulpit, with the hopen Bible under their noses, and—— Comin', sir.'

It was perhaps fortunate, both for the hearer and the utterer of this harangue, that the appearance of a customer in the shop without prevented it from going any farther. Poor Mrs. Blister was already quite stiff with consternation, and Mrs. Bartlet, who, much as she liked the sound of her own voice, never seemed to find its effect soothing, might soon have lashed herself into a state of excitement that would have led to observations even more severe than those already recorded. But business was providentially brisk during the next ten minutes ; and Dick

returned from his mission with the tarts ; and, altogether, by the time the mistress of the establishment was able to rejoin her friend in the parlour, her sterner mood was considerably mollified. Mrs. Blister, on her side, had been prudently fortifying her astounded sensibilities by further applications to the bottle ; so that the dialogue between the two ladies recommenced under auspices greatly more genial than might have been expected.

‘ And one thing I should have mentioned —it’s quite my fault that I did not, dear Mrs. Bartlet, but you know I am s-so forgetful ! Mr. Strome can’t be goin’ into the Church for the sake of money, for he’s to marry Miss Dene, and they say she’s as rich as the Archbishop of Canterbury ! And I’ve got a letter in my pocket this very moment, with Mr. S-strome’s name on the envelope in her handwriting ; it came this morning, and I’m keeping it safe against he comes back. So I think he must be one of the elect, I do, I’m sure ! Don’t you ? ’

‘ Let’s ‘ave a look at the letter, my dear,’

said Mrs. Bartlet, wiping her hands on her apron, while her face softened with a sympathetic curiosity. 'Oh, to be sure, that's a real lady's 'andwritin', and no need of the coat-of-arms to tell us! Rich, is she? Well, if she's fond of him, I don't say no to it for one, and as far as she goes he'll be one of the helect, I make no doubt of it! Though what he should be doin' with stayin' out all night and missin' her letters, 'e may know, not I! I 'ope all may turn out well, if only for your sake, Mrs. Blister; for she ought to do somethin' 'andsome for you, for the care you've taken of him, buyin' him cakes at a shillin' the pound, and cheap at the price, though I say it! Take another drop, my dear; it'll do you good. I must take a look what mischief that boy Dick's got into!'

In edifying converse of this kind the afternoon slipped away; and the gin was so fortifying, and the snow-storm so suggestive of the need of fortification, that it was past six o'clock before Mrs. Blister, in a most gushing and optimistic frame of mind, found

herself fairly on her way back to her own house, with her shawl over her head and her cake under her arm. At the door she was overtaken by a telegraph messenger, with a telegram for Mr. Sebastian Strome. She took the responsibility of assuring the messenger that there would be no answer ; and having dismissed him with a blessing and twopence, she found her way upstairs, shook the snow from her garments, put the letter, the telegram, and the cake on a tray, and with the tray in her hand knocked at Strome's door and entered. It was quite dark : evidently Mr. Strome had not yet come home. Advancing blindly into the room, Mrs. Blister was so unfortunate as to stumble over a chair ; in the effort to save herself she let fall the tray, with all its contents ; and at the same moment she heard, or fancied she heard, an unearthly sound close to her ear, something between a heavy sigh and a groan. Mrs. Blister's potations, conscientious though they had been, had not fortified her against the supernatural, and without waiting to

recover anything but the tray and her own feet, she made for the door again with what despatch her shaking limbs allowed. Arrived in her own chamber, she first locked the door, and then placed herself on her knees beside the bed, with the intent, probably, to exorcise the evil spirit by prayer. On this occasion, however, the spirit was too strong for her, and before the prayer was half finished, Mrs. Blister was lost to the consciousness of outward things.

Strome, awaking with a start, found himself in darkness, with a coldness pervading body and limbs, and an undefinable anxiety pressing upon his heart. He had had a vivid and disagreeable dream, the influence of which, in the absence of all light and sense of position, still clung about him. For a minute or so, he could not have told where he was; and in spite of the cold, sweat stood upon his forehead.

Presently Smillet's peaceable snores brought him to himself. He felt for the

match-box and struck a light. By the time his eyes had become accustomed to the glare, he had recovered his self-possession. There was an envelope on the floor at his feet ; he picked it up and read his own name upon it in Mary Dene's handwriting. Clenching his teeth, he tore it open, and read the letter which it contained.

‘Is this a coincidence?’ he thought ; ‘or is it the earnest of my dream?’

A yawn from Smillet drew his eyes to that quarter, and he saw that his friend was waking up. He walked over to the fireplace, and leaning against the mantelpiece, waited with the letter in his hand. It now occurred to him to wonder how long the letter had been in the room. He looked at the date ; it was the previous morning. Just about the time that he had received the anonymous communication ! This letter contained the same request as that, though it did not give the same reason for it. It must have arrived by the early post, while he was still at the club. Strome regretted, for more

reasons than one, having left it to chance whether or not he should accompany Smillet to hear Jenny Lind. It would have been better, on all accounts, to have found out what was going on in Falkirk Road. It was too late to remedy the mistake to-day. It might be too late altogether. He would decide that question to-morrow.

‘Well, are you really going to wake up?’ he said to Smillet with a smile.

‘Oh, I’m awake!’ exclaimed Smillet, jumping up with an absurd pretence of alertness. ‘Is it late? I had such an odd dream! I dreamt you were having an auction here, and I was just bidding for your old dressing-gown!’

Strome took a sudden inward resolution. ‘Your dream may come true,’ he said. ‘At all events, I’m going to have the auction.’ He paused a moment and then added: ‘I’m bankrupt: I’ve not got twenty pounds in the world.’

‘You don’t mean it!’ cried Smillet, bringing up his eyeglass. Strome remained

silent. 'By Jove, I was certain of it!' continued the other, in a cheerful falsetto, dropping the eyeglass and sticking his hands in his pockets. 'I knew it from the beginning! I told you not to play with that fellow Fawley again. By Jove, old fellow, I'm awfully sorry, I am really! If you want a thousand, you know, I can arrange to let you have it. Only—you won't play with it?'

Strome smiled again and shook his head. 'Never mind, Thomas, I don't mean to borrow. Thank you all the same. I've had enough of playing with your money, and—— Stop! I didn't lose that—what did I do with it?' He put his hand hurriedly to an inside pocket as he spoke, and drew out therefrom upwards of two hundred pounds in bank-notes. Having counted them over, he held them out to Smillet. 'That's what you won while you were asleep,' he said. 'I'd quite forgotten about it.'

'It doesn't belong to me,' Smillet said, retreating from the proffered money. 'I

began last night with twenty pounds, and won over a hundred with them. But I only play for the fun, you know, so I gave the winnings to you to lose for me. If you won it's none of my business. You'll have to keep it.'

Strome reddened up to the roots of his hair. 'I can't argue the matter with you, Smillet,' he said sharply. 'If you don't take it, I shall put it in the fire.'

'Well, in with it,' returned the other.

Strome turned as quick as thought, but the fire had utterly gone out. Smillet laughed. Strome laughed also, rather constrainedly, and said: 'The gas will do as well.'

'I'll turn it out if you move,' cried Smillet, laying his hand on the button. 'Look here, now, why can't you listen to reason? I never did keep any money I won at play, and I never mean to. If you'd lost it you wouldn't have owed it to me, and—'

'I can't argue the matter,' Strome repeated, interrupting him in a quieter tone. 'I

can't take the money, because I've lost all mine. If I had kept the four thousand I had at eight o'clock this morning I should probably have no objection. That's all. It isn't a question of logic. It might be different if I had any one dependent upon me.' He broke off here, and a slight change passed over his face. After a pause, he tossed the bundle of notes on to the table, and added: 'At all events, don't say any more about it.'

'You might use it till you've had your auction, at any rate,' suggested Smillet plaintively. 'I think you're very crotchety, upon my word I do. You're going to be married soon, and what difference will a couple of hundred make to you then.'

'Wait till I am married. Meanwhile, I've paid my bills, and shall have enough to go on with. But the whole idea is absurd. When I want to borrow money I shall apply to Fawley. What is that on the floor by your chair?'

'It looks like a tea-cake,' said Smillet, stooping to examine it through his eyeglass.

He picked it up, and along with it something else which was close beside it. 'Here's a paper addressed to you—a telegram.'

'Give it here—or, no; open it, and read it out. From my solicitor, I suppose. I was to have met him to-day.'

'This is from Barbara Trench,' said Smillet, reading. '"Fanny Jackson at Vicarage—badly hurt on railway. Mr. Strome bruised. Please come home." Who is Fanny Jackson? There must have been a railway accident. Dear me, I hope it isn't serious.'

Strome had quickly stepped forward and taken the telegram, and was standing with his gaze fixed upon it. He said in an inward tone: 'I saw how it was.' Then he added aloud: 'I must take the eight o'clock train, Smillet; you'll excuse my leaving you so abruptly.' Then in the inward tone once more: 'It's my doing—it only needed that. Oh, father!' He still continued to look at the telegram.

'Can I do anything—be of any use?' inquired Smillet uneasily.

‘What? You’ll excuse my leaving you so abruptly. I must take the eight o’clock train. I’ve had bad news—a telegram. My father has been injured trying to save a woman on the railway. They were between two trains. It’s my doing; I should have gone to her yesterday.’ He uttered these sentences mechanically, as if his real thoughts were elsewhere. Smillet was appalled at the haggard expression of his face. Strome folded the telegram carefully and put it in his pocket; then looked about as if in search of something. By-and-by he pressed his hands over his face, and when he removed them he looked more master of himself than before, and spoke in a livelier voice; but he did not seem aware that he had said anything already.

‘I shall be obliged to leave you unceremoniously, Smillet. They want me at home—accidents will happen, you know. You might spend the night here, if you like, and look after my belongings while I’m away. I shall just take my valise, with a change of

linen. What's all this money? Yours or mine? Oh, I recollect!

'I wish you'd take it—some of it; you might need it,' faltered Smillet.

Strange to say, Strome no longer seemed to regard the offer in the light of an insult.

'It's kind of you to think of that, Smillet,' he said. 'To tell the truth, I was pretty hard hit last night, as I suppose you've heard; if you can let me have fifty I should be much obliged. There might be a funeral to pay for—who knows? People die every day.'

'Of course they do,' exclaimed Smillet, emboldened by his unexpected success to attempt a further enterprise, 'and you'll die yourself if you don't take something to eat. Do you know you've had nothing since we dined together yesterday—more than twenty-four hours? I believe you're light-headed at this moment, upon my word I do. You don't half know what you're about. Come, why not try a bit of this tea-cake; it looks

good, wherever it came from. Plenty of time before eight o'clock.'

Strome complied with the same surprising docility that he had exhibited in the previous matter; and he and Smillet eat the tea-cake, without knowing anything of its origin or previous history. It was now half-past seven, and Smillet, who had by this time assumed the direction in everything, having packed the other's valise, insisted upon carrying it to the railway-station for him. Arrived there, he bought the ticket, and saw his friend safely into a compartment.

'I shall stay at your rooms until I hear from you,' he said through the window. 'Isn't there anything I can do while you're away?'

'No; unless you'll get an auctioneer to appraise the furniture. Those pictures ought to bring something.' I can't tell what may happen now. Strange, isn't it, Thomas? and yet they say there's nothing in dreams. Well, I'm much obliged to you—good-bye!'

'I don't believe he's fit to be trusted by

himself, upon my word I don't,' soliloquised Smillet, as the train moved away. 'Something seemed to have come over him all of a sudden ; it couldn't have been the telegram, could it ? It's a comfort to think he got the cake down. I wonder whether Miss Dene knows who Fanny Jackson is ?'

END OF VOL. I.

